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Venture

SCIENCE FICTION

Space Is a Lonely Place

a novelet

by **JAMES E. GUNN**

Affair with a Green Monkey

by **THEODORE STURGEON**

MARION ZIMMER BRADLEY

POUL ANDERSON



Venture SCIENCE FICTION

MAY 1957

Venturings

● One thing Venture S F promised in its first issue was stories of action and adventure. "Action" and "adventure" are big words—they offer much room to move around in. Consider the lead stories in our first three issues: Poul Anderson's "Virgin Planet" told of the perils—and pleasures—encountered by one man on a strange new planet; Tom Godwin's "Too Soon to Die" was the story of a small colony's struggle to survive on a near-uninhabitable world, over a period of 200 years; James E. Gunn's "Space Is a Lonely Place" is concerned with the very real hazards and problems involved in getting a manned spaceship to Mars. These three stories have little in common other than their basic adventure emphasis—and the fact that each has something to say.

● In a recent letter, James E. Gunn writes: " 'Space Is a Lonely Place' is the fifth and last of a series of stories devoted to a detailed consideration of the psychological factors in man's coming conquest of space. I started on the series because I thought s f was removing itself too far from the present and losing what seems to me one of the strongest elements of its appeal—most readers are impatient for the future; they don't want to wait for the glories and adventures that are beyond the horizon . . . With all the information available today on what space will be like, I set forth purposefully to detail the everyday tastes, smells, feelings, sights, sounds, and conflicts of this life ahead, transmuting, I hoped, raw data into human drama . . . The theme is that we will go into space for all the wrong reasons and find there all the wrong things—and it won't really matter. Man must keep trying to conquer his environment, man must keep trying to answer the question, 'Why am I?'—or else cease to be man."

● Some time ago, Marion Zimmer Bradley wrote an adventure fragment and put it aside—"adventure science fiction had gone out of fashion." At our urging, Mrs. Bradley hauled out that fragment and turned it into "Bird of Prey"—a rich, colorful tale of life on a frontier planet. About the hero, Mrs. Bradley says: "That Cargill seems not to *do* much—rather things happen *to* him—is, I think, basic in his character. And it identifies him (again, I think) with a large number of men in *this* day and age. Such a man doesn't make things happen—but when a series of disconcerting circumstances are thrown his way, he shows an ingenious ability to ride along on the current of events, managing to turn every new circumstance from near-catastrophe into precarious success."

● Mr. Gunn and Mrs. Bradley obviously have very different approaches. We like both of them, partly just because they *are* different. What do *you* think?

—RPM

Venture

SCIENCE FICTION

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Cover by Emsch, illustrating "Space Is a Lonely Place"

Interior illustrations by J. Giunta and C. Smith

Joseph W. Ferman, PUBLISHER

Robert P. Mills, EDITOR

Venture Science Fiction Magazine, Vol. 1, No. 3, Whole No. 3, May, 1957. Published bi-monthly by Fantasy House, Inc., at 35¢ a copy. 12-issue subscription \$4.00 in U.S.A. and possessions, Canada and the Pan American Union; \$5.00 in all other countries. Publication office, Concord, N.H. Editorial and General offices, 527 Madison Ave., New York 22, N.Y. Entered as second class matter at the Post Office at Concord, N.H., under the act of March 3, 1879. © 1957, by Fantasy House, Inc. All rights reserved. Protection secured under the International Copyright Convention and the Pan American Convention. Printed in U.S.A.

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SPACE IS A LONELY PLACE

by JAMES E. GUNN

*Two attempts to reach Mars had failed—horribly. Lloyd picked
five friends for the third attempt, and tried not to listen
when his wife called him the most cold-blooded man she knew.
"Those poor domned bastards" the Inspector said;
and Lloyd watched and figured and suffered, as he saw
his friends walk to the brink of insanity and lean over*

TERRY PHILLIPS WATCHED HER husband come out of the bedroom brushing down his graying hair. It wouldn't lie right after it was washed, even though Lloyd tried to tame it with a stocking cap. The one-third gravity did that.

She studied him with eyes cleared for a moment of ten years' habit. Those ten years had aged Lloyd more than they should. He looked much older than a man still this side of forty. His face was dark and marred by frown and squint lines. His eyes were flecked with cataracts. He was thinner. But he was still a handsome man, almost as handsome as when he had stood with her in their marriage ceremony.

There were unpleasant memories, too, but she wouldn't think of those. Not now. Not when her mind was made up.

Lloyd was worried. She wondered if it was the ship.

But the first thing he asked about was the children.

Terry laughed. She could still laugh. "Paul and Carl have been up for hours. It's ten o'clock, sleepy head. They're in the recreation room."

"Oh. Fine. Fine." He rubbed his chin absently and stared at the rungs of the metal ladder fixed against the inner wall. They mounted toward a square door in the convex ceiling. It was closed. Something thumped against it; they heard muffled laughter.

Terry said gently, "Breakfast 'is ready."

Lloyd started. "Oh. Yes." He sat down and drained his glass of reconstituted orange juice. He started in on the powdered eggs as if he really enjoyed them. "I

got in late last night. After one. Didn't wake you, did I?"

Terry lied. "No. Were the films bad again?"

Lloyd nodded, frowning. "Two hundred and fifty-nine days. If they can hold out one day longer, they'll make it. They'll be the first men to complete a successful trip to Mars. They've got to hold out!"

She said slowly, "I think you must be the most cold-blooded man I've ever known. Those men are friends of yours, and you care more about the success of the trip than whether they live or die."

Lloyd sipped the instant coffee. "You think I wouldn't have traded places with any of them? They knew what they were doing. They knew that two previous attempts had failed. Horribly. They went out with their eyes open."

"What do you think it's like to be in the viewing room, watching them walk to the brink of madness and lean over, and know that they're God-knows-how-many million miles away, and you can't do a thing?"

"I'm sorry. Forget it."

Lloyd looked at her quickly. "You aren't really sorry, are you?" He paused. "I've decided to get scooters for the kids on their birthdays."

Terry put down the cup she had been holding in both hands as if to warm them. "Lloyd! Carl's just six, and Paul's only eight."

"You can't keep them cooped

up in these six rooms forever. They're responsible kids. It's perfectly safe."

Terry said with iron-hard determination, "They'll never use them." Her lips were compressed into thin, pale lines. "You might as well know. I'm leaving you. I'm taking the children with me. I wasn't going to tell you while you were worried about the *Santa Maria*, but we can't go on like this any longer."

"Terry!" Lloyd's eyes were shocked and hurt. "I know I'm hard to live with, but I'm no worse than I ever was. You know I couldn't live without you and the kids. You're my wife—"

Terry shook her head sadly. "You're married to that Wheel out there. You're mother to those men. You don't need a wife. I don't know why I ever thought I could make it work. I must have been crazy. Everyone said I was crazy to come out here with you."

"I've been living in this stupid ball for ten years. It stinks, Lloyd, literally stinks. Old sweat and old food and oil. If I fry onions I can smell them for weeks. The air is so wet and thick you can almost feel it like damp cotton in your lungs. I want to feel like a human being again. I'm going Inside, Lloyd. I'm never coming out again." Her voice was close to hysteria. "Never!"

Lloyd said quickly, "But there are other women out here now."

This is a permanent base. We're space dwellers. You can't expect us to live without families—"

"Women can't live out here, Lloyd!" Terry tried to control her voice. "The other women are hermits, just like me. How long has it been since you saw one of them outside her cocoon? When we get together, it's by television. Did you ever try to play bridge by television? I haven't seen another woman in the flesh for a year."

Lloyd's voice was suddenly sober. "Have you thought about the kids?"

"That's all I have thought about. Do you know those children have never been on Earth? Never? They're being cheated of their birthright—blue skies and green grass and playing baseball with the other kids. They'll never be human beings." She was screaming now. "They're growing up into monsters! Monsters!"

Lloyd looked at her, not moving, not saying anything. "I think they're pretty darned nice kids. Don't project your disappointments into them, Terry. Children don't see things the way we do. As long as they have love and security—"

She was panting with the effort to control herself.

Lloyd said gently, "Maybe you need a vacation. We can afford it."

"Another one? Without the children? No, thanks. When I leave it will be for good, and

the children will go with me."

Lloyd's face grew tight. He bit his lower lip the way he did when he tried to suppress his emotion. *If he'd only let it out*, Terry thought. *Just once. So I wouldn't have to guess—*

Lloyd's voice was ragged. "Give me a chance to think about it. Please, Terry?"

She nodded reluctantly. She couldn't bear to see him hurt. Still.

"And please don't worry the children," Lloyd said. "Don't let them feel that we've been arguing—and especially not about them."

Terry said bitterly, "Always the psychologist!"

"Perhaps it was the father speaking that time." Lloyd turned and went up the ladder quickly. The port came open at his touch, swinging upward. The sound of laughter came through clearly now and childish voices shouting, "Daddy! Daddy! Look at me!"

Terry blinked fast to keep back the tears. "Lloyd! Lloyd!" she said. "If you only loved me!"

But she said it to herself.

They were sturdy boys, all brown, long arms and legs and the kind of dark-brown eyes that seem almost black and look down deep inside a man. They floated in the center of the spherical recreation room, their faces laughing, their bodies as graceful as porpoises in the sea.

Lloyd looked at them and his heart grew cold. What would he be without them? An old man, dying.

"Hello, kids," he said. "What is it today?"

Paul answered. "We're playing Martians. He's playing Martian. I'm an Earthman, and I try to catch him, because he's trying to keep me from getting to Mars. If I catch him in five jumps, I get to Mars, and if he gets away, I'm dead."

Carl chanted, "Nyah, nyah! You can't catch me!" He stuck out his tongue at Paul and pushed himself away. He hit the opposite wall and bounced back. In the middle, where there was no-gravity, he did a curious kind of flip that sent him twisting in another direction.

Lloyd had never seen anything like it.

Paul's hands, outstretched to catch his brother, missed by inches, and the older boy landed on the curved wall, his legs under him, bent and thrusting.

Lloyd jumped for the ceiling. Beside these brown, silken creatures he felt old and stiff. He touched the inner airlock door and slowly drifted from a handstand to his feet as the door opened. He slipped through.

He kept remembering their voices as he zipped himself with the ease of long practice into his suit. Children played like that. In

the midst of wars they were soldiers. In the midst of plagues they were doctors and nurses. In the midst of space . . .

The other suits hung like decapitated monsters on the walls of the rectangular shaft. Terry's suit hadn't been used for a long time. He would have to check it carefully. If she were going to leave—

No. He wouldn't think of that.

He unlocked the outer door and slid through until he caught the hook-on ring. The door clanged shut. Now he could see the cottage from the outside. His home.

It was a sphere, a miniature world thirty feet in diameter, which is not so small in terms of living area when all of it is usable space. The sphere spun rapidly to give the illusion of one-third gravity in the rooms nearest the surface, diminishing rapidly toward the axis near which he stood. The axis consisted of the airlock, an imaginary cylinder through the recreation room, and the cargo hold at the other end.

Around the cottage was space—the night was a sooty black scattered with more stars than seemed possible to someone reared inside Earth's filter of air.

There to the right was the red brilliance of Mars, closer than any of the others he could see, but still very, very far. To the left was Earth, 1,075 miles away, dark now with the sun and the moon

both on the other side. It was a huge, black disk, dotted here and there with the reddish spots of cities, blotting out the stars, beneath one moment, hanging like a gigantic weight above him the next.

A man could do that to his senses out here where there was no up or down, where the only directions were here and away. He could drive himself mad with illusions. What must those poor lost souls out there near Mars be suffering, so far from home that Earth seemed like only another star among millions? He looked at Mars again, but he couldn't possibly glimpse the *Santa Maria*. Even the best telescope on the Wheel couldn't pick it out now.

A few hundred feet away was the Wheel, a spinning inner tube crossed by a single spoke, gleaming white in the starlight, against the velvet night. Around the Wheel were the spheres of other cottages—nine of them. Somehow they made the Wheel seem more like home. They humanized it, made it less like a foothold in space and more like a colony of men and women who were there and intended to stay. He *couldn't* let that be broken up.

It was hard on a woman. Men can live on dreams, sometimes, but women need solidity. But men need women and children, and always, somehow, they had induced women to go with them to the frontiers and build homes.

The question was: Had men gone so far that their women couldn't follow?

He launched himself toward the Wheel and floated effortlessly toward it. As he passed the round Hub at the center, he reached out with the hook of one sleeve-ending and caught the cage into which the taxis slipped with their human cargoes.

He went through the airlock, removed his suit and hung it on its rack, and clambered down the sagging netting to the weight control room. The air was bad in here—thick and hot and humid and filled with the many odors men make living and working. It was worse than the cottage.

Colonel Danton was waiting for him outside Celestial Observation. He looked old and haggard and sick. His hair was a thin, pure-white stubble on his head. His eyes were almost blind with cataracts, and his body was bent and thin. He looked eighty years old instead of less than fifty.

Phillips thought, *He won't be able to stand another failure.*

Danton said, "Jim Faust is here." His voice still carried the firmness and force of authority.

Lloyd said, "Here? What does he want?"

"He's worried. He wants to go over the films himself. He doesn't think he can carry us much longer—not if this shot fails."

Lloyd stared thoughtfully at

Danton. "You don't need to go through this again. Take it easy this morning."

Danton's jaw tightened and then slowly relaxed. "Doctor's orders? Keep him happy, Lloyd. I'll see you at lunch."

Lloyd turned, opened the airtight door, and went into the darkness of the improvised viewing room where Faust was watching films of the fifth day. . . .

II

Five days out. The *Santa Maria* was one million miles from Earth. The ship was a child's toy of spheres and cylinders and rocket engines flimsily bolted together with pieces from an Erector set. It was all white; it gleamed like porcelain in the relentless sunlight.

The top half of the central cylinder was cargo space for equipment that would be needed for the investigation of Mars. Above that was the personnel sphere, dotted with portholes and shutterlike temperature regulators. There were three decks: the supply deck, with its lockers for spacesuits and its cylindrical airlock; the living deck; and the control deck. At the top was the plastic bubble of the astrodome.

The ship tumbled slowly as it coasted along the seven-hundred-and-thirty-five-million-mile ellipse which would carry it into the orbit

of Mars at the instant the red planet would reach that point. The rocket motors had blasted for fifteen minutes; the rest of the two-hundred-and-sixty-day trip would be in utter, inescapable silence.

Inside the sphere, the predominant impression was bare utility: everything was painted metal, plastic, and rubber tile. Every wall of the ship and much of the nominal walls and ceilings were used for gauges, ducts, lockers, bunks, chairs, tanks, conduits. . . .

The control deck was a closed universe of grinning gauges and shifting spots of colored light, but the man on watch glanced at them only occasionally. He was staring through the astrodome, watching for the Earth as the ship's slow tumbling brought it past.

Like all the crew members, Burt Holloway was a short man. He was a slim five feet seven with thin, mobile hands, short, blond hair, and very blue eyes. He was not handsome. Men said he had a monkey face, with his weak mouth and receding chin, but women thought he needed mothering. He was barefooted. His only garment was a pair of shorts.

Four of the crew were on the living deck, which was reached from either of the other two by concentric holes in the separating partitions bisected by a painted aluminum fireman's pole. Fast-

ened to one curving wall were bunks which could be folded back. The other side of the room belonged to the dining unit: a snack dispenser, a giant freezer which extended into the storage deck, a short-wave range, and a circular table.

Jack "Iron" Barr, five feet eight of bulging muscles and matted red hair, lay in his bunk, his belt snapped to rings on the framework. He had dark blue eyes and eyebrows that met in a straight line above his crooked nose. He was reading a letter written on pale-blue note paper. Occasionally he brought it close to his face and sniffed, his eyes closed, a slow smile stretching his wide mouth.

"Hey, now," he said huskily. "Listen to this: 'Lover, honey, baby—I'll never forget that night you showed me—'"

"The Big Dipper," Ted Craddock finished. He was sitting in the slings of the table, a plastic flask of orange juice in one tanned hand. He was the baby of the group at twenty-five, a beautiful, brown-skinned young man. His hazel eyes squinted into laugh lines at the corners. "That woman must drench her note paper with musk. Put it away, Iron. It's stinking up the place." He broke off in a brief spell of coughing.

Barr said irritably, "It's better than the other stinks we breathe all the time. I swear I never knew you guys were so smelly. And you,

Ted, spraying the place with germs. Why don't you cover your mouth? Hey, now, listen to this one." He drew a folded square of pink paper from under the waistband of his shorts. "This was a blond little joy baby—"

Emil Jelinek said quietly, "Knock it off, Iron." He was thirtyish to the others' late twenties, a thin, angular man with sparse black hair and a small, rakish mustache. He was lying in the bunk next to Barr, his hands folded behind his head. "Women are more than two and a half years away. By the time you get back they'll have two kids apiece."

"Not these," Barr boasted. "They'll wait. That's what Ellen says here. She says she'll wait for five years if she has to, or ten. She says there's nobody like me."

Tony Migliardo laughed from the other side of the deck where he floated beside the snack dispenser. He was a good-looking, dark-skinned young man with liquid brown eyes and blue-black hair. "There are many men like you, Iron, and she will find them—reproductive organs with minor attachments for mobility."

"You dirty little—" Barr tried to spring out of his bunk, but the belt pulled him back.

Jelinek turned his head and stared hard at Barr. "Everybody be quiet for ten seconds! If we're like this in five days, what will we be doing in two hundred and

sixty? Mig? Do you hear me?"

"I am very sorry, Iron," Migliardo apologized. "I should not have said that."

Barr relaxed. "Okay then."

"And, Iron," Jelinek added. "I think it would be best if you didn't enlighten us on the details of your amorous conquests. There are enough natural irritants."

Barr grumbled, "You guys are missing your chance for the kind of education you don't get in the Academy. Go ahead. Stay stupid."

Craddock began to cough.

Barr twisted to stare at him. "What about that? That could get old, too."

Jelinek said, "I'll see what I can do. Ted?" He opened the locker beside his head and pulled an ophthalmoscope down.

Craddock freed himself from the table slings and floated over beside Jelinek's bunk. He held himself there with one hand while Jelinek inspected his throat. "The lining is irritated, but that could be just from coughing." He reached into the locker for a small, metal cylinder. He flicked a small lever on the side. Two smooth, blue pills popped into his hand. "A little penicillin won't hurt. Come back for another in six hours."

Barr said suddenly, "Hey, now, Emil. That ain't right what you said about five days."

Migliardo glanced at the repeater clock on the wall. "Five

days, one hour, sixteen minutes, thirty-one seconds."

Barr muttered, "That clock must be wrong. It's more like a month."

Jelinek said, "It's synchronized with the crystal-stabilized chronometer on the control deck. There isn't a more accurate timekeeper anywhere."

Barr grumbled, "I wouldn't put it past Phillips to rig it slow. He's full of tricks like that. Then when we were halfway and about to go batty, he'd tell us the trip was almost over. He'd think that was cute."

"Now, Iron," Craddock said, floating back toward the dining table, "what's the use of starting something like that, even as a joke?"

"Who's joking? I *know* we been gone more than five days."

Craddock caught the table edge and slipped his feet through the slings. "There's no radio—how could he tell us?"

Barr said sarcastically, "What do you think that swivel-mounted, parabolic dish antenna is for?"

"That's for telemetering the sounding rockets when we get to Mars."

"So they told us." Barr sneered. "But why is it always pointed toward Earth?"

Craddock said violently, "How do I know? Maybe it's telemetering our gauges."

"Telemetering! With the power

that thing pulls? Are you kidding?"

Migliardo swallowed the bite of candy bar he had been chewing. "There's no big drain."

Barr looked at him scornfully. "That's why you're assistant engineer on this tub instead of engineer. The drain doesn't show on the gauge. I wondered why the reactor wasn't delivering its rated capacity. That dish out there takes part of it, and the power bypasses the gauge. It's gimmicked."

"Now, Iron," Migliardo said peacefully, "why would they do anything like that?"

"Why would they seal up a wall of the control deck and place it out of bounds?" Barr demanded. He twisted to face Jelinek. "You know more than anybody else."

Jelinek said calmly, "We were told that there is a safety factor in addition to the safety factors in fuel and structural strength."

"Why didn't they tell us what it was?"

"As a psychologist I can tell you that a safety factor you know all about isn't really a safety factor at all. You start figuring it in with the rated capacity. This is something we can depend on to get us through if everything else fails. We're better off not knowing exactly what it is."

Migliardo said, "Like believing in God."

Jelinek nodded. "It's a matter of faith."

Barr's lips curled. "Nuts. I want to *know*. I'll leave God to those who need him. He doesn't show up on any of my gauges. Take my word for it, this business of a safety factor is just as phony. They didn't tell us what it was because there isn't any. That sealed wall is nothing. If we opened it up, we'd find it as empty as the Pope's promises."

Migliardo said intensely, "Barr—!"

Jelinek's mild voice cut through. "Mig! Keep your opinions to yourself, Iron, and keep your hands off that panel. If it's empty we're better off not knowing. The time business that started this is absurd, and you know it. We check it every day when we figure our position."

"Well, yeah," Barr conceded, "but—"

Something went *pingngng!* The echoes raced through the ship. The lights went out. Somebody screamed, "Meteor!" Voices shouted a confused cacophony of orders. Bodies blundered about.

Then Barr said stridently, "Shut up! Everybody! It didn't hit the sphere. Burt? You all right?"

"Okay," Holloway called from the control deck. "But we're on battery now. I'm trying to locate the hit."

"No need," Barr said. "It's up ahead—in the reactor or the wiring between."

Craddock began, his voice

quavering, "If it's the reactor—"

"We're dead," Barr said bluntly. "The battery will only last a few hours, and then the air conditioning goes off." There was a scuffling sound. "I'll go out and check. Mig. Suit up and get ready to lend a hand."

And then even the sound was gone.

III

In the viewing room of the Little Wheel, the screen was dark. Lloyd flipped on the lights and looked at Faust. The dapper little man was turning, his iron-gray, immaculate head becoming a finely chiseled face. He was no more than five feet four, but everything about him was in proportion, from his well-shod feet to his controlled face.

His smooth forehead was wrinkled now, his blue eyes hard. "It's you, Lloyd," he said, too quickly, in his big, orator's voice. "Was that the end? Is that what you are keeping from me?"

"Calm down, Jim," Lloyd said. "We're not keeping anything from you. The meteor didn't hit the reactor. It clipped a lead, and the *Santa Maria* went on battery. There wasn't enough power to give us anything but voice, and even that was a drain the ship couldn't take for long. Barr located the hole and spliced the lead in twenty-five minutes."

Faust relaxed. "Thank God for Barr. The rest of them sounded like an uninstructed delegation."

"Barr is the man of action," Lloyd said. "When the unexpected demanded quick, accurate action, he took charge. That's why he was there."

"Then he earned his passage. Let's get back to it."

"We have two hundred and fifty-nine days of film—twenty-four hours a day."

Faust frowned. "Can I trust you to make a selection for me?"

Lloyd stood up. To him the room seemed big. It was Celestial Observation, a room about twenty feet high by twenty feet wide. To Faust, though, the room must seem cramped, sticky, and stinking. Of course, after ten years a man can get used to these things, just as he can get so used to a wife that he would be only part of a man if she should leave.

He took a chair close to Faust and looked squarely into the politician's eyes. "You'll have to, Jim. What's got into you? You're our public relations man. You've trusted us before. I think you're the politician now, Jim."

"I'm both. The Party has consistently thrown its weight behind spaceflight, starting with the first mad rush to reach the S.I.1 in time to save Rev McMillen. We've fought your battles for more than thirty years, Lloyd. I think we deserve a little trust."

Lloyd said softly, "You've got it, you and the Party, but let's not put everything down to disinterested benevolence. You've done very well out of it, politically and financially. The Party is the most powerful single political force on Earth, even though it does not have an absolute majority. And you're the biggest voice in the Party."

"You've also done well personally. Nothing shady, I realize, but your side of the bread has been very well buttered. And you had some of your own money in the Big Wheel. You've made your profit. Now you say you can't trust us."

"Trust," Faust said, "is a two-way street."

Lloyd said slowly, "What would it do to public confidence if the world knew that the crew of the *Santa Maria* were bickering before the ship had been out a week?"

"The stock market would take it hard."

Lloyd spread his hands expressively. "So?"

"So I'm here, Lloyd," Faust said evenly. "I have to know the truth. The planets aren't indispensable. We can relax for a few years, consolidate our gains, forget about Mars and Venus."

"What about the surpluses, Jim? What about the economic dislocation?"

"Better a dislocation now that we can ride than a crash later that

will throw us all into the mud and put somebody like Deacon McIntire in the saddle. We can stand a dislocation if we handle it right, if we *prepare* the public for another failure. They've seen two ships sail right past Mars and sweep back. If we broke the news of this failure suddenly, there would be chaos—political and economic. McIntire would gain enough of our shocked voters to give his Fundamentalist Coalition a clear majority. Once he's in, we couldn't get him out. We'd have to assassinate him, and that would really tear it. I don't want to see that, Lloyd. Space is important, but it's not as important as people. We can come back, Lloyd, if we aren't torn apart now."

"There's a saying about fighters. They never come back. Everything has its psychological moment. This is it for Mars. It's now or never."

Faust's voice was regretful. "Maybe you're right. It may be never. If that happens I'll be very, very sorry. But I'll live, and so will you. I'd like to see Earth go on living, too, even without the stars."

Lloyd said in amazement, "You really are prepared to throw us over! The Party has been identified with spaceflight. Could you shake that tag?"

Faust hesitated. "It would be rough, but we could do it. Space has been good to us—all of us,

not just the party. The people would understand retrenchment. But they would have to be prepared for it. Starting now."

"Sure, Jim," Lloyd said bitterly. . . . "But you've got to understand. Everything isn't what it seems. It takes interpretation." He spoke briefly into the wall mike. "Here's the thirtieth day."

IV

Thirty days out. The *Santa Maria* was five and one-half million miles from Earth. The planet was still a perceptible disk, but the moon beside it had dwindled to a point. Both were still the most brilliant bodies in the universe, excepting the sun. Hollo-way stood at the dark port staring back the way they had come at the planet called home. He did not move; he scarcely seemed to blink.

The living deck of the personnel sphere was completely quiet. It was a silence which would not even be imagined by anyone except a spaceman. Then came a slap of a magnetized card on the dining table where Craddock and Migliardo were playing gin rummy.

Craddock coughed and laid his ten cards face down on the table while he covered his mouth with both hands. The paroxysm jarred him, shaking his whole body.

Migliardo picked up a flask and

shoved it into Craddock's hand. Barr twisted in his bunk, a stereoscopic viewer held carelessly in one hand. He shouted, "Knock it off! Knock it off!"

Craddock squeezed water into his mouth, swallowed convulsively between coughs, and squeezed again until all the water was gone. Slowly the seizure eased. Craddock wiped tears from his eyes. "Thanks, Mig," he said weakly. He had grown thinner. They all had.

"Emil!" Barr shouted from his bunk. "Why the hell don't you do something about that?"

Jelinek's calm voice floated to them from the control deck. "I've told you, Iron, it's psychosomatic."

Barr muttered, "If somebody doesn't do something, Ted is gonna wake up some morning without a throat to cough through."

Jelinek's thin face appeared in the hole. "What do you mean by that, Iron?"

"Just what I said."

Craddock said apologetically, "He didn't mean anything. It gets on his nerves, my coughing all the time. Hell, it gets on my nerves, too."

Jelinek hadn't moved. "We're all in this together, Iron. We all get through or none of us. Oh, I know—maybe Mig could take over for you and do a job that might be good enough. Burt could pilot the ship if something happened to me. Mig could navigate

for Burt if he had to, and you know enough about wiring and electronics to do the essentials of Ted's work. But actually it wouldn't work out that way. There's five of us. That's a bare minimum for sanity. Any less and none of us would make it."

His face disappeared and silence descended again. Barr shrugged and looked back into his stereoscopic viewer. Craddock and Migliardo drew cards from the thick pack on the table and slapped them down. Holloway stared silently out the port.

Jelinek said, "Tank B is starting to freeze. I'm going to rotate it into sunlight."

Nobody moved or looked up. Somewhere in the ship a motor whined as it accelerated a fly-wheel. Very slowly the ship began to turn. The whine descended the scale again, faded into silence.

Holloway screamed. He pointed a shaking finger at the port as everyone turned toward him and Jelinek's face appeared in the opening.

"What the—!"

"Burt!"

"For God's sake, Burt!"

"There—" Holloway said. "There was something—out there!"

"What was it?" Jelinek said. "Try to tell us what you saw."

Holloway clung to a handhold by the port and shook. His body floated out in the air. "I don't

know what it was. Something—something white. It's gone now."

Jelinek said sharply, "You saw more than that to make you scream. What was it, Burt?"

Migliardo said softly, "It could be garbage, perhaps."

"Yes," Holloway said quickly. "That was it. Floating beside the ship. When you turned the ship, it went past the port."

Jelinek said insistently, "Maybe that was it, Burt, but what did you think it was?"

Angrily Holloway said, "All right! It looked like a face, a face with a beard!"

"Look like anybody you ever saw?" Jelinek asked.

Holloway's shaking had dropped to occasional tremors. "I'm not crazy, Emil. No, I never saw that face before."

"Did it look dead?"

"No!"

"How do you know?"

Holloway took a deep breath and said steadily, "It looked in at me. It saw me. Its eyes—I never saw such a look of sorrow and pity before. It felt—sorry for me. Sorry for all of us."

"For God's sake!" Barr complained. "I never heard so much bull in my life. You'd just been burning your eyes out looking at Earth and the moon. It was an after-image."

Jelinek nodded. "I suppose that was it—superimposed upon a flash of sunlight. Or maybe, like

Mig said, some trash. Don't let it worry you, Burt."

Holloway laughed shakily. "Who's worrying? What could be out here, almost six million miles from anywhere?"

"Hey, now," Barr said. "Here's something worth looking at." He flipped the plastic viewer toward Holloway.

Holloway caught it, put it up to his eyes, and stared into it. "So that's what you've been having such a time with!" he said flatly.

Craddock said eagerly, "Let me see!"

Holloway tossed it to him as if he were getting rid of filth. Then he wiped his hand on his shorts and turned back to the port.

Craddock stared into the viewer for a long time, clicked another scene into place, and stared again. His cheeks grew flushed.

Migliardo was watching him curiously. "What's this all about?" He reached over to grab the viewer.

"You'll get your turn!" Craddock said.

Migliardo yanked it away. "You can have it back." He stared into it and then hastily tore it away from his eyes. "In the name of—" He crossed himself automatically. "How did you smuggle these damned things aboard? Can't you find anything better to do than staring at these dirty—?"

Craddock held out his hand.

"Give it back! Give it to me!"

Jelinek's head was looking through the hole again. "I swear I spend more time looking at you idiots than I do looking at the gauges. Let me see that!"

Migliardo flicked it contemptuously toward Jelinek. He reached for it, but the viewer sailed through the hole and out of sight. A moment later there was a crash of plastic against metal.

Barr released his belt hooks in a swift, practiced movement and sprang toward the pole. He stared through the hole at Jelinek, who appeared again holding the smashed viewer.

"Sorry, Iron," Jelinek said apologetically. "Clumsy of me."

Barr said furiously, "If I thought you did that on purpose—"

"You'd what?" Jelinek asked calmly.

In a cold, deadly voice Barr said, "I'd beat you until you'd walk out that airlock without a suit rather than stay in here with me. It's ruined," he wailed.

"I'm not really sorry," Jelinek said. "Can't you understand that dirty pictures just aren't the proper thing for a two-and-a-half year stag cruise. The only way you'll get back to women is by not thinking about them."

Barr said angrily, "Give it to me!" He grabbed the wreckage from Jelinek's hand. "You get by

your way, and I'll get by mine." His eyes held a heavy-lidded look of dislike. "Don't get in my way again, headshrinker, or one of us won't get back."

Barr slipped his thick, hairy legs into two table straps and carefully put the smashed viewer on the table. None of the pieces were missing. Carefully, with a great delicacy in his thick fingers, he separated the broken segments and gently placed them on the table. "Hey, Burt," he called, "throw me that tube of liquid cement in my locker."

In a moment it came sailing toward him. Barr raised a careless hand and plucked it out of the air. The movement stirred the pieces on the table, and Barr covered them quickly to keep them from blowing away. Slowly, moistening each edge with clear cement, he began to fit the pieces together.

Migliardo went "gin," and he gleefully added up the score.

Holloway stared out the port, unmoving.

"I'm hungry," Barr said suddenly. "You're cook today, Mig. Put something on. I'd go for a nice, juicy steak today."

"We had steak yesterday," Migliardo said absently, studying his cards.

"I don't care when we had steak," Barr said. "I want steak today."

"If we eat steak once a week,

we have enough to last for the whole trip," Migliardo said. "If we eat it every day, we will have none for two years. Today we will have filet of sole."

"What is this—Friday?" Barr asked.

"As a matter of fact," Migliardo said, "it is."

Barr sneered. "I thought I smelled a fish eater. Well, I hate fish! Why should I eat fish because of you?"

"There is fish enough for fish once a week," Migliardo said calmly. "Friday is as good a day for the rest of you as any other. You liked fish before."

Barr slammed his hand down on the table. "Well, now I hate it! I tell you what," he said slyly, "you eat my fish and I'll eat your steak."

"No, thank you," Migliardo said politely. "I like fish once a week. I like steak once a week, too. Anyhow—" Migliardo glanced up at the clock—"it is not time for supper."

Barr roared, "That clock's wrong! Which are you gonna believe, my stomach or that clock? I know which I'm gonna believe." He slipped his legs out of the slings and pulled himself around to the deep freeze beside the range. He sorted through the prepared meals until he found what he wanted and slipped it into the range.

Migliardo started to say some-

thing, shrugged, and closed his mouth. Craddock threw down a card.

"Gin!" Migliardo said triumphantly, putting down his cards. "That's three hundred and twelve dollars you owe me."

Craddock stared down incredulously. Suddenly he looked up and threw his cards into Migliardo's face. "Cheater!" he shouted hysterically. "You lousy cardsharp, I'm not going to pay you! I'm not going to play any more, either! You're a dirty dago cardsharp!"

He broke off in a convulsion of coughs that racked his body and made his hazel eyes bulge in their sockets. Migliardo stared at him in astonishment, blood oozing from a cut under his left eye where the corner of one card had hit him.

The screen went dark.

V

As the lights came on, Faust turned quickly toward Lloyd. "Another meteor?"

"End of the reel."

Faust's breath sighed out. "It doesn't look good."

Lloyd said, "Don't be misled. We're showing the worst of it. There are many days when life went on in an ordinary, uneventful fashion. No arguments, no fights, no disagreements."

"Something like that once a month would be too often. . . . It seems like—an oddly assorted

group of men that was chosen."

Lloyd smiled. "Criticism intended? We picked them carefully, first looking for crew balance, then the necessary skills. They were intended to complement each other, one man's weakness against another's strength. We tried to figure pressures, the abrasion of personalities, the pecking order—but it's like trying to predict the nature of matter on Jupiter. Those men are living out there under conditions about which we had no information—when we chose them. We're getting it now."

Faust looked curiously at Lloyd. "I thought those men were friends of yours."

Lloyd's face hardened. "They are. Every one of them. You wouldn't put a friend through a test to destruction? Maybe not. But you'd nominate the best candidate and then watch his campaign closely, so that if he fails you won't make the same mistake again. I don't want to send out any more men blind."

Faust frowned. "I see. But doesn't the television equipment take up space that could be used for something that could help them survive? More food and water? Enough steak so that Barr could have one every day? Radio receiving equipment?"

Lloyd shook his head. "If there were enough steaks, Barr wouldn't be interested. His drive is psy-

chological—all their drives are. Receiving equipment isn't a help but a threat to their sanity. How would you feel if you knew you were cut off, irretrievably, from the rest of humanity for a minimum of two and a half years, and you could hear, constantly, the reminder that men were living safe, sane, happy lives, that they were eating anything they wanted, going to ball games, sleeping with women, walking out on the green Earth? It would drive you mad.

"We tried that on the *Pinta* and the *Niña*. On the *Pinta* the radio was smashed the first week. On the *Niña* it lasted ten days. Those men are cut off. They must know it, know that they can receive no help, that they're on their own. Psychologically they must feel that life has stopped for everyone else, too. If they can get back, they will find everything just as it was when they left, the same friends, the same jobs, the same girls to love them. No, receiving equipment isn't the answer."

Faust said, "You sound as if you're trying to convince yourself."

"You think I'm not? You think I don't dread watching these films? And yet I look forward to it with a fascination that horrifies me."

"And still I know that those men have enough to get them through—if men can get through at all. They have more than

enough food, more than enough fuel, more than enough air. And on top of that, there is a safety factor."

Faust's eyes brightened. "Ah, the mysterious safety factor. I had almost forgotten that. What is it?"

Lloyd hesitated. "I'd rather you saw for yourself. It worked out rather—oddly." He glanced at his wrist watch. "How about lunch? Amos is waiting."

Faust's voice mellowed. "Amos looks worse than a year ago. How long is he going to last?"

"Not long enough to do what he wants to do."

"Why hasn't he ever made general?"

"He's turned it down repeatedly. A colonel commands the Little Wheel. Inside, they think it's not a big enough job for a general, and take his job away and he'd die. Physiologically it would be disastrous. Don't tell him I told you—he's got a bad heart. Heavy primary damage. He'll live longer here."

"You've never made general yourself," Faust said. "How many promotions have you turned down?"

"A few," Lloyd said curtly. "Here we are." He pulled open a door, and they were in the mess hall, three long aluminum tables with benches attached. The room was empty except for Amos Danton, who sat next to the delivery chute of the electronic range. He

was staring expressionlessly at his tray as the door opened, but he looked up, smiling, as they entered.

"I've taken the liberty of ordering for you," he said.

They seated themselves at the trays and set to work. Danton, Lloyd noticed, had only a chef's salad. He stirred it around with his fork, but Lloyd did not see him take a bite.

He loved this man, this carved, blackened face with the almost-blind eyes and the thin stubble of white hair, this hard, talented leader of men who had sent too many of them to their deaths and had died with every one of them, this strange, dedicated spacefarer, this father-image.

Danton was saying quietly, "What do you think, Jim? You know men, and you're fresh. You haven't lived with it as we have. Is it bad?"

Faust nodded slowly. "It will be a miracle if they make it."

Danton groaned. "And you've only seen the first thirty days. Lloyd, I told you I should have gone. You should have let me go."

Lloyd started to speak, but Faust was there ahead of him. "No, Amos. You were indispensable. Without you there would be nothing here now. You're still indispensable."

"I'd like to believe you," Danton said, covering his face with a wrinkled hand. "But Lloyd can

carry on." He turned fiercely on Lloyd. "You *will* carry on, Lloyd! You can't have any life but this." He looked toward the open port, where the many-colored stars turned endlessly. "The old order passeth. The day of the unspecialized spaceman is done. Now comes the psychologist who can fit men to space and not space to men."

Lloyd said, "Ready?"

Danton rose with them.

Lloyd turned to Faust. "Go on ahead, will you, Jim?"

Faust nodded and headed briskly for the door.

When they were alone, Lloyd said, "Amos, Terry is leaving me."

Danton closed his eyes for a moment and then looked with concern at Lloyd. "Taking the kids?"

"So she says. She's had it, Amos. I've seen it coming for years. I've tried to stave it off, but what can you do when a woman wants the company of sane people with their feet on the ground, wants her children to run across green lawns bareheaded in the sunshine, to play baseball and football, go to dances and sit with a girl under a full moon? How can you argue with that?"

"You don't argue, son. Even a man who's never had a woman can tell you that much."

"I've thought of one thing," Lloyd said slowly. "We went wrong when we built the cottages.

There's too much loneliness out here already without adding more. We've got nine families and one empty cottage since Chapman's wife left him. Let's connect the nine together with the empty one in the middle. That one we'll convert into a recreation center with lounges, a dance floor, card rooms, a gym in the center. The women can get together without going outside, and the crewmen can use it, too. Can we afford it?"

Danton nodded. "Sounds like mostly labor, and we've got nothing to work on, now. We not only can afford it, we can't afford not to have it. But that isn't going to solve your problem."

Lloyd's face turned gloomy again. "I know."

"I hate to sound like an advice-to-the-lovelornist," Danton said, "but women need security. Emotional security. How long has it been since you showed Terry that you love her?"

"Too long," Lloyd said soberly. And then with a sudden explosion of better spirits, he said, "Let's go see the films."

VI

Seventy-three days out. The ungainly contraption of fuel tanks and rocket motors and fragile living space, the *Santa Maria*, was twelve million miles from Earth. For the last few days, the bright double star that was the Earth and

the moon had slowly dimmed and disappeared. It had turned its night side to the ship.

This time the ship was not quiet. Music pounded throughout the personnel sphere, with wild riffs, the sudden brassy blare of trumpets, the low dirty growling of slide trombones. Holloway was on watch. He was staring through the combination telescope and celestial camera at the spectacular event that was about to begin.

Craddock was at the water spigot, filling his flask. Coughs occasionally shook his body. His face looked quite thin now; he seemed years older.

Barr was lying in his bunk. He was reading a paperback book. Occasionally a chuckle broke through the crash of the music.

Jelinek and Migliardo clung to the handholds at the port. A thick, translucent shield had been slipped over it, but the sun was still a white-hot disk through it.

"Iron!" Craddock said suddenly, "can't you turn down that noise just a little? We've heard those tapes twenty times."

Barr said, "It's better than listening to you hack all the time."

Jelinek said, not looking around, "Just a little lower, Barr. That's not asking much."

"The hell it isn't," Barr said.

"Mig?" Jelinek asked. "Too loud?"

"Too loud," Mig said.

"Three of us say it's too loud,

Iron. We don't need to bother Burt. You're outvoted. Turn it down."

"——you!" Barr said.

Jelinek spun to Barr's bunk and twisted the knob on the stanchion. The music stopped. Instantly Barr had Jelinek's thin wrist in his big left hand. The bones grated together. Barr pulled himself up to Jelinek's face in the silence that was more absolute than the grave.

Barr said, "I like it, see! The silence is too loud; you have to drown it out. I want life around me, if I have to kill every one of you. Now leave me alone!" He threw Jelinek's arm away, switched the music to its highest volume, and let the straps pull him back into a floating position above his bunk.

Jelinek looked down at his wrist. White fingermarks ate deep into the tanned skin. Slowly they turned red. He chewed at the end of his mustache. It had grown ragged. Then he turned, shrugging, and caught the handhold by the port. Migliardo looked at him questioningly. Jelinek lifted an eyebrow helplessly.

Barr roared, "And get away from that water, Craddock!"

Craddock jumped. He said sulkily, "There's lots of water."

"Not the way you've been lapping it up," Barr said. "Every time I look I see you sneaking another drink."

"I'm allotted four and a half

pounds a day. And you know it."

"You've been swilling twice that. Cut it out, or I'll have to put a lock on it like I put on the freezer to keep you guys out of the steaks."

Jelinek said, "There's more than enough water, Barr. If we get desperate, we've got utility water."

Barr looked at Jelinek, his lip curling contemptuously. "Would you drink that stuff?"

"Yes."

"I guess you would! Well, I won't. I want clean water. Lots of it. You want to make it hard on yourself, go ahead!"

Jelinek said carefully, "Don't drive us too hard, Barr. We'll let you have the steaks, we'll let you——"

"Who's letting me?" Barr said brutally. "I'm taking!"

"We'll let you drive us a ways, because we're all on the *Outward Bound* together. But if you push us too far, we may decide that we have a better chance without you."

"—— you! You —— —— wouldn't crock a flea if it was crawling on your——"

Mig shouted, "Emil! It's starting!"

Jelinek swung around. Across the flaming disk of the sun edged a small black spot. It was Earth. They were seeing what few other eyes had ever seen—a transit of the Earth and moon. An hour later a smaller speck would appear and follow the Earth toward the

sun's blazing center. The transit would last eight hours.

Holloway called exultantly, "Thirteen hundred twelve and six seconds. Right on the nose."

Migliardo said, "I'd better give Burt a hand. We need these readings for course correction." He swung to the pole and pulled himself toward the control deck.

Craddock looked at Barr and said, "I'm going to check on the supplies." He coughed and disappeared through the hole leading to the storage deck.

When they were alone, Jelinek said to Barr, "Turn it down a little, Barr. I want to talk to you, and I'd rather the others didn't hear. It isn't often any two of us are alone."

Sullenly Barr reached over and switched the music down.

Jelinek moved his hand impatiently. "What are you trying to do, Barr?"

"Get what's mine."

"All the steaks? That's yours? Listen, Barr!" Jelinek said urgently. "We could be just as hard as you are. But we know we're living in an egg shell. We're all together on the *Outward Bound*—"

"It's the *Santa Maria*," Barr snapped.

"Sorry. Bad habit. What I'm trying to say is—we know that our lives depend on you. In the same sense, your life depends on every one of us. You can't get back without me, Barr. I'm the pilot. If

something happens to me, you're dead. Get that! Dead, dead, dead! No more steaks, then, Barr. No more women. No more Barr."

"I don't scare worth a damn, Jelinek."

"Barr! It's time you were scared. We're looking death right in the face. If you aren't scared now, there's no help for any of us!"

"Shut up!" Barr screamed. "Shut up or I'll shut you up! We're in no more danger than we were on that joy ride to the moon. We've got it made, Emil! We're only ten days out."

"Barr. This is only the seventy-third day. We've got one hundred and eighty-seven to go."

"You're trying to scare me," Barr said quickly. "I've kept track. Don't look at the clock! It's wrong. They're trying to trick us, Phillips is. I know how he works. We're almost there, Emil. Don't lie to me! It's true, isn't it? We're almost—"

Jelinek was shaking his head slowly. "It would be no kindness to let you go on thinking that. Look out there—a transit of the Earth and moon. Seventy-three days out, Barr, exactly."

Barr's eyes were bulging with fear; his chest drew in huge gulps of air. "No, no. . . ."

Craddock's voice floated up gleefully from the storage deck. "Barr, I just urinated in the water supply. Hear me, Barr? What will you drink now, Barr?"

Anger contorted Barr's face like

an expression of relief. He started up. "That filthy, little—"

Jelinek shoved him back. "He's lying, Barr. There's no way to get into the water supply down there. But that's how far you've driven him."

Barr's eyes gleamed savagely. "He'd find a way. He hates me. You all hate me. I don't give a damn! You all watch me and talk about me and plot against me! Go ahead. I can take you one at a time or all at once."

There was a scrambling sound as Craddock went through the airlock door, and a clang as it slammed down. Barr said viciously, "I'll get the little — when he comes back in."

"This morning when I came on watch," Jelinek said slowly, "I found tool marks around the sealed panel on the control deck. They weren't there yesterday. You had the watch before mine."

Barr sneered. "So what?"

"You've been trying to get in there. You're going to stop, Barr. If I find any more tool marks around that panel, I'm going to kill you, Barr. It would be easy for me. A hypodermic some night, a little arsenic on one of the steaks. You stay away from that panel!"

After a moment Barr said, "You wouldn't dare kill me. You're too careful. It would reduce your chances of getting through."

"I wouldn't take a chance on it if I were you, Barr," Jelinek said.

The music clicked back up. The beat made the ship vibrate.

There was a scrambling sound from the supply deck. Jelinek turned. Craddock, in full space-suit, was drifting along the pole. Through the faceplate Jelinek could see Craddock's face contorted, his eyes staring, his mouth open.

Jelinek sprang toward him and started loosening the wing nuts that held the helmet in place. He pulled the helmet off. Craddock's screams rose above the crash of the music. They came out one after another with scarcely time between for a breath.

"Ted!" Jelinek shouted. He slapped him across the face, clutching one arm of Craddock's suit to keep from being spun across the room.

Craddock's screams stopped suddenly. The room was horribly silent.

Craddock drew a shuddering breath, closed his eyes, and opened them. Sanity had come back into them.

Jelinek said forcefully, "What happened, Ted?"

"I was—going down—to check—on the supplies—" He drew in another ragged breath. "I saw him. Somebody back there. He came out from behind one of the sounding missiles."

"What did he look like?"

"Pale face. Beard. Very white hands—"

Jelinek said sharply, "How could you see his hands if he had on a suit?"

"No suit. He had a sort of cloth around his hips like a sloppy pair of shorts. No helmet, no suit."

Somebody said, "Stowaway!"

Jelinek looked toward the hole leading to the control deck. Two faces were framed there: Migliardo's, dark and frowning; Holloway's, white, stricken. Holloway had spoken.

"There's no air back there," Jelinek said. "No food or water. No way a man could live for five minutes, much less seventy-three days."

Holloway said, "It doesn't have to be a man."

Barr shouted, "What else could it be?"

Holloway didn't say anything.

Barr shouted, "What are you trying to do, scare me? It's just a joke, eh, Ted? Trying to get even?"

"No joke to him, Barr," Jelinek said. "He's terrified. It was an illusion. We're all liable to see things. It's when we all see the same thing that it will be too late. Barr, go down and see what it was."

Barr swung himself out of his bunk eagerly. "You bet."

Jelinek snapped. "Mig! Help me get this suit off."

Craddock couldn't seem to move at all. After the suit was removed, he trembled in every muscle. Every few seconds he would cough. Migliardo guided him toward his bunk.

As Migliardo strapped him down, Jelinek got a hypodermic from his locker.

"I'll give him some reserpine."

Migliardo said softly, "Did Ted's description remind you of anything?"

"The face Burt saw through the port. It's natural. Suggestion is a powerful force."

Another scream came from the storage deck. Jelinek and Migliardo stiffened, but this was a scream of rage. Barr swarmed into the room along the pole. He hung there like an angry, red monkey. "Somebody tried to kill me!"

"We were all here," Jelinek said.

Barr's voice rose higher. "Somebody's been messing with the oxygen gauge on my suit. The gauge reads full, but the tank is empty."

"It must have been an accident," Jelinek said briskly.

"I know who did it," Barr shouted. "That little sneak lying there." He pointed a trembling finger at Craddock. "He did it before he said he ruined the water. He wanted me to chase him outside. Then he'd come back and you'd say it was an accident. Too bad."

"That's absurd, Barr!" Jelinek snapped. "Clip on another tank and check around the sounding missiles!"

Barr swung toward him viciously. "Unh-unh! Maybe something else is wrong with the suit. It'd be easy to poke a pinhole in one of the joints, jigger a valve.

. . . I'm never gonna use that suit. If you want to kill me, you'll have to do it where I can see you." He was shaking all over.

Jelinek said, "Mig. Go check."

Mig swung along the pole.

"Barr!" Jelinek said. "Lie down. Read one of your filthy books. Just shut up!" He looked toward Holloway's white face and staring blue eyes. "Burt! Get back on watch!"

An unnatural silence fell over the sphere.

Minutes passed. No one moved. Finally there was the clang of the airlock door and then the sounds of someone stripping off his suit.

"Nothing," Migliardo said, coming along the pole. "Nothing white. Nothing moving. Nothing."

Beyond the port, the transit of the Earth and moon was proceeding placidly.

VII

Jim Faust was shaking his head as Lloyd turned on the lights. His face was as pale as Holloway's had been. "Bad," he muttered. "Bad, real bad."

"Remember," Lloyd said, "that you're seeing the worst of them. They aren't all like that."

"God," Faust muttered, "how I hate that Barr!"

Lloyd cleared his throat. "He's a good man. He was our extrovert. Balance. If they'd all been like Migliardo or Jelinek, they'd all be insane by now, drawn into fetal

positions. Barr gives them something to hate. We didn't figure it that way, but it happened."

Faust said, "You can't live with hate."

"Sometimes," Lloyd said, "you can't live without it. The *Santa Maria* has been operational for almost five times as long as the *Pinta*, for three times as long as the *Nina*."

"Better isn't good enough," Faust said.

"In some of the reels we skipped," Lloyd said, "Jelinek had started psychoanalysis."

Faust said bluntly, "He's not qualified to give it. The man's not sane himself. He can't control Barr. He's already threatened him with death. That's not the act of a sane psychologist. Barr's frightened enough as it is. He has tried to convince himself that the trip is almost over. But he knows this isn't true, and he compensates by acting the petty tyrant. You can't frighten a man who's already scared to death."

"Jelinek has pinned his faith on that sealed panel," Lloyd said. "Barr threatens that faith. What about Migliardo?"

"Compared to the others, he seems sane. Maybe he's just quiet. He's probably going quietly mad inside. They all have symptoms of paranoia. People are plotting against them, spying on them—"

Lloyd shook his head. "Let's watch the next reel."

Faust and Danton turned their swivel chairs toward the frosted screen as Lloyd flipped off the lights.

VIII

One hundred and thirty-three days out. The *Santa Maria* coasted silently along the seven-hundred-and-thirty-five-million-mile ellipse that would bring it finally to Mars. Inside the personnel sphere it was silent, too.

The ports were all closed. The room was dark. It was 0300 by ship's time. It was part of the enforced period of inactivity the crew called night in a place where the sun never set, where the night was all about them eternally.

Only the deep, regular breathing of men at sleep could be heard and occasionally a relay clicking on the control deck. Then a dark figure twisted in its bunk and started screaming.

Men tumbled out of their bunks, scrambling in the weightlessness for a handhold.

Migliardo found the light switch, and the room sprang into prosaic reality from its shadowed horror. Jelinek, Barr, and Migliardo were floating in the air. Holloway had pushed himself up in his bunk. He was still screaming.

Jelinek wrapped his thin legs around a stanchion and shook Holloway violently. The navigator's eyes opened blankly as his head

flopped. He saw Jelinek. He stopped screaming.

"What the hell happened to you?" Barr asked querulously.

"I had a dream," Holloway said. "I dreamed I was falling."

"Oh, — —!" Barr said with great disgust. "One of those. I wish I had a cigarette. I'd give my right — — for a cigarette."

Holloway went on as if he hadn't heard. His eyes were distant and remembering. "I dreamed I was dead. I was in a metal coffin, and I was falling. I would never be buried, and so I could never rest. I was dead, but I could still hear and see and feel, and I could never rest because I was in a metal coffin, and I was falling."

Migliardo said quietly, "Aren't we all?"

Barr twisted around fiercely. "Aren't we all *what*?"

Jelinek said, "We're all in a metal coffin, and we call it the *Outward Bound*."

Migliardo looked at him. "I finally remembered where I heard that name. It was an old play. A group of people were on this ship, heading for an unknown port. And they finally realized they were all dead."

Jelinek said ruefully, "A man's subconscious plays tricks on him."

Barr had been glancing back and forth between them, a look of horror growing on his face. "What are you guys talking about? We aren't dead."

"No," Jelinek said. "It's a grisly joke, and one we can't afford."

"Emil," Holloway said in a quiet and terrible voice. "Emil. Ted's lying there in his bunk. He hasn't moved."

Ted's bunk was next to Holloway's. Jelinek spun around the end of it and caught the aluminum framework. He stared down at Craddock. "Mig. Throw me my stethoscope." But he didn't wait for it; he put his ear to Craddock's chest. In a moment he let his head float upright. "Never mind," he said softly. "He's dead."

Migliardo crossed himself and began murmuring something under his breath. Barr's eyes bulged with terror. Holloway floated over his bunk, shaking, hugging himself.

"I'm cold," Holloway said vaguely. "Don't you think it's cold in here? The air is bad, too. I think I'm going to be sick."

Jelinek began an inspection of Craddock's body. Suddenly he looked up sharply and glanced around the room as if he were counting them. His lips moved. "Who's on watch?" he asked sharply. "Barr. This is your trick, isn't it?"

"Shepherd offered to take it," Barr said sullenly.

"He's been standing a lot of your watches, hasn't he?"

"No more than for Burt or Ted." Barr's voice was shaky. "What killed him?"

"Not what," Jelinek said slowly. "Who. Ted was murdered."

In the silence, Jelinek looked at each of them.

"How do you know?" Barr said. "He was dying. We all knew that. He hasn't been able to keep down any food for a month."

"Somebody couldn't wait. He was strangled."

"W—who—" Holloway stammered, "who—who did it?"

Jelinek looked at each of them soberly. "Do we really want to know? If we know, we'll have to do something about it. If we aren't sure, then we can go on pretending."

"And leave a murderer unmarked among us?" Migliardo said. "How can we be sure he won't kill again?" He looked from Barr to Holloway to Jelinek.

Barr said, "Maybe the murderer doesn't even know it. Anybody who'd do a thing like that would have to be cracked. He—he wouldn't necessarily know he had done it."

"That's a good point," Jelinek said. "Maybe we have a homicidal schizo among us. I think you're right, Mig. We should know. So we can tell the murderer who he is."

"How can you be sure?" Holloway said weakly. "Anybody could have done it. Barr—you were always fighting with him about his coughing and drinking. You said you'd kill him. Now

you've done it! Just as you said!"

"Me!" Barr said, outrage in his voice. "What about you? You hated him. You wanted to trade bunks with Mig so you wouldn't have to sleep next to him. Or Mig! You fought with him, too, Mig. He called you a dirty, dago cardsharp. . . ."

Jelinek said wearily, "Who didn't fight with him—and with everybody else? Anyway, Ted marked the murderer for us. He was stronger than the murderer thought. He's got skin under his fingernails. A little blood, too. It belongs to the murderer. And the murderer has marks on his arms where Ted clawed him in the final struggle. Everybody hold out their arms."

Holloway was staring at his already; so was Migliardo. Holloway held his arms out eagerly. "No scratches. See? Nothing."

"Mig?"

With an expression of relief, Mig held his arms out.

"You're clean. Iron?"

Barr put his arms behind him. "Let's see yours."

Jelinek held out his arms and turned them over slowly so that the palms were down. They were unmarked. "Iron?"

Barr hesitated. "I scratched my arms yesterday trying on my suit. Somebody has been messing with it again. Somebody's been trying to kill *me*! That's the one to look for." The words came spilling

from his mouth. "He couldn't get me, so he got Ted. Ted was easy. Ted was dying anyway. I'm too tough, so he got Ted. Somebody's been watching us, trying to kill us, and he finally saw his chance."

"Iron?" Jelinek repeated quietly.

"What about Shepherd?" Barr asked eagerly. "Why don't you look at his arms?"

"I don't think we have to look any farther. Anybody who won't show his arms must be sure he's guilty."

Barr said suddenly, "It's a trick. I bet there isn't any skin under Ted's fingernails. You just said that because you saw my arms yesterday when I scratched them." He pushed himself toward Ted's bunk. "You're trying to trick me into saying I killed him."

"Look!" Migliardo said and pointed at Barr's arm.

On the outside of the arm, just above the wrist, were three long, red, vertical scratches. Serum oozed from them.

Barr hid the arm in front of him. "I didn't kill him!" he shouted hysterically. "I'd remember if I killed him. I don't remember." His voice trailed away in hysterical sobs.

"What now?" Migliardo asked.

Jelinek's eyebrows lifted. "I suppose we might as well have the funeral."

Holloway said, "What are you going to do with the body?"

Jelinek said, "Give it a space-

man's burial. It's all we can do."

"And have him follow the ship to Mars?" Holloway's voice quavered. "See him floating out there every time we look out?"

"If we give it a good shove," Jelinek said, "it would be out of sight in a few hours."

"He should be buried," Holloway muttered. "He won't stay quiet unless he's buried."

Jelinek shrugged. "We'll give him a spaceman's burial—he'd have wanted that. Do you know any of the ceremony, Mig?"

"I'll try."

"Food," Barr said craftily. "We may run short of food. What's the use of throwing away—"

"If we ever get that desperate," Jelinek said sadly, "we'll be finished. Unfasten him from the bunk. Bring him to the storage deck."

Barr shoved himself away from the bunk. "Me? I don't want to touch him. Somebody else. I can't do it. Let Shepherd do it."

In a cold, hard voice, Migliardo said, "Tow him over here, Barr, or we'll tie him around your neck."

"No!" Barr whimpered. "No!"

"Take him, Barr," Holloway said in a thin voice.

Slowly Barr drifted back to the bunk. Moving with great caution, so that he did not touch the body, he released the belt on either side. Slowly he pulled on one strap. The body rolled in the air and followed him. Suddenly the eyelids

sprang open. The sightless eyes stared accusingly at Barr.

Barr dropped the strap as if it burned his hand and threw his arm up in front of his face. "Tcd!" he screamed. "I didn't do it!"

The body drifted to Jelinek, who was clinging to the fireman's pole. He caught it by one arm. "Barr!"

Moving like a man asleep, Barr turned and pushed himself toward Jelinek. He caught the pole and then took the belt strap in his hand. He went through the hole.

The others followed—Jelinek, Migliardo, Holloway. They formed a circle around the pole. Jelinek straightened out the body so that it lay at their feet. The eyelids refused to close.

Migliardo said, "How about Shepherd?"

"He's on watch," Jelinek said.

Migliardo cleared his throat. "‘Man that is born of woman,’" he said softly, "hath but a short time to live, and is full of misery. He cometh up and is cut down like a flower; he fleeth as it were a shadow, and never continueth in one stay. . . .'"

They bowed their heads for a moment.

Jelinek looked up. "Get into your suit, Barr."

Barr turned blindly, opened a locker, and put on his suit automatically. When he was ready, Migliardo had the airlock door open.

Jelinek said, "Take the body out. Give it a good shove."

Barr picked up the trailing belt strap and moved clumsily into the airlock. The body stirred. Jelinek guided it into the cylinder.

The clang of the door was a somber note of finality. They stared at it for a moment and then, one by one, they swung along the pole to the living deck.

Holloway turned immediately to one of the ports, opened it, and looked out. "I don't see anything."

Migliardo asked, "What are we going to do with Barr? We can't let him go free."

"Vengeance?" Jelinek asked.

"Common sense. Do you suppose there was really something wrong with his suit?"

Jelinek shook his head gloomily. "Too easy. And too ironic. Justice doesn't work so directly. No, Barr was the only homicidal personality we had aboard. And we're going to have to live with him for the next two years or so. Jolly."

"Can't you—" Migliardo's voice broke, "put him away?"

"No, I can't. I can remember when he was my best friend. He might be that again." Jelinek's voice dropped. "Barr didn't kill Ted; space did it. How can you condemn a man for something you've considered, rationally, cold-bloodedly, yourself? Could you kill Barr?"

Migliardo hesitated. "No."

"None of us could."

Holloway said urgently, "I don't see them. There's something wrong. There's nothing out there."

The airlock door suddenly clanged. Jelinek looked around the room and then floated quickly to Barr's locker, opened it, and pulled out a small pipe wrench. "Go lie in your bunk, Burt. Hide this. Use it if necessary."

Holloway stared at Jelinek with frightened eyes and then moved to his bunk. He adjusted his straps to the rings and stretched out, the wrench along the leg nearest the wall.

Barr had removed his suit. He came cautiously along the pole.

"Did you shove off the body?"

"Yes." Barr's eyes shifted to the open port.

"Mig," Jelinek said quietly. "Check."

Migliardo looked once at Barr and left.

"Barr," Jelinek said, "what are we going to do with you?"

Barr's muscular hands flexed nervously. "I don't know."

"You might kill again."

"No!" Barr shouted. "I wouldn't. I was only—I swear to you, Emil, I didn't kill him."

"Iron," Jelinek said, shaking his head, "how can we believe you? How can we trust you?"

He pushed himself away from the wall with one hand. He floated toward Barr. Barr shoved himself back. "Don't try anything!" he said

wildly. "I'm warning you. I'll do something. I'll—I'll take care of all of you. I'll kill you, Emil, if you touch me." His fists were doubled as his back touched the wall close to Holloway's bunk. He started drifting back.

Jelinek moved his hand. The needle of the syrette gleamed.

"You're trying to poison me!" Barr screamed. "I'll kill you—all of you. I'll—"

Holloway brought the wrench down on Barr's head. It made a dull, hollow sound. Barr's eyes rolled back in his head. His body twitched once, and then it was still, floating in the air.

Jelinek said, "Thanks, Burt," and began towing Barr toward his bunk. He snapped Barr's belt onto the rings. He went to his locker and got a roll of adhesive tape. Carefully he taped Barr's wrists to the framework of the bunk, winding the tape around and around. Then he selected a vein on the inside of Barr's elbow and injected the contents of the syrette.

The airlock door clanged. In a few moments Migliardo came into the room. He took in the situation at a glance. Jelinek was rubbing disinfectant into the cut on Barr's head.

Migliardo said, "He stuffed Ted's body in among the sounding missiles. I shoved it off. I see you took care of—the situation."

Jelinek looked up angrily. "For how long? My morphine will last

for thirty days. What do we do then?"

"Maybe when we reach Mars—" Migliardo stopped.

"Can we trust him then?"

Migliardo shrugged helplessly. "You're the doctor."

Barr's eyelids flickered. "Mama," he said.

Migliardo turned to the pole. "I'm going to talk to Shepherd."

The deck was silent then except for the voice of a mistreated child saying, "Mama."

IX

When the lights came on, Faust was blinking. "Those poor, damn bastards," he said softly. It was almost a prayer.

Danton was staring blankly at the screen, his hands clenched in his lap. "I can't take any more," he said hoarsely.

Faust said, "Don't blame yourself, Amos."

Danton looked at Faust with eyes filled with guilt and horror. "I sent them out, Jim. Me. I sent them into that. I killed Ted. I made Iron into a homicidal maniac."

"I picked them," Lloyd said.

Faust said, "Nobody's responsible. It's space. Those men went because they had to, just as you came out, Amos, because you had to. Any new environment is hungry. Men tame it by dying for it. Men died for the Western hemis-

phere, to tame the Antarctic, to develop atomic power, to build skyscrapers and roads. Men died to build the Little Wheel and the Big Wheel. Space is hungry, too. And men stick their heads in its mouth because they're men."

"Too old," Danton said, shaking his white head. "I grew old too soon." He turned and walked erectly out of the room.

"Thanks," Lloyd said quietly.

"You think I didn't mean it?"

"I know you meant it. But that wasn't all you meant. You didn't tell him we'd have to give up if the *Santa Maria* doesn't make it."

"He knows it," Faust said.

"Another film?"

"No," Faust said. He smiled wearily. "Like Amos, I can't take any more." He tried to sound cheerful. "Well, maybe they'll make it. There's still five of them."

"Five?"

"Sure. Barr, Jelinek, Holloway, Shepherd, Migliardo."

"Jim," Lloyd said, "only five men went aboard that ship when it started for Mars. One of them is dead."

"But there's five!"

"What does Shepherd look like?"

Faust said thoughtfully, "He's got a beard. Rather tired, deepset eyes—"

"How do you know, Jim? You've never seen him."

Faust looked startled. "I must have. I can almost see him now—"

He must have been a stowaway. That's why he wasn't in the first few films. Behind that sealed panel—?"

"Jim," Lloyd repeated, "you've never seen him."

Faust rubbed his eyes hard with his knuckles. "You're right. He was on the control deck the whole film. Hallucination? How do you account for it?"

Lloyd shrugged helplessly. "I know the seed, but I can't account for the flower. There's that safety factor we told them about. And there was a posthypnotic suggestion we gave them: if they were ever in desperate trouble, there would be help."

"Barr thought you were tricky."

"No trick, Jim. It's real. There's help. But we never expected it to take this form." Lloyd's jaw tightened. "Come on, Jim, I'll show you your cabin."

He led Faust down the spoke to the other side of the wheel and the cabin he had once occupied when he had first come out.

"Amos is having some dinner sent in for the two of you," Lloyd said. "He'll expect you in his cabin next door at 1800. Anything you'd like?"

Faust shook his head. As Lloyd turned toward the spoke, Faust said in a puzzled voice, "If I never saw Shepherd, how did I know what he looked like?"

Lloyd said, "I wish you could answer that question for me."

The hot, steamy hydroponics room was on the other side of the Wheel beyond the air-conditioning unit. A wide, flat tank of green-scummed water took up most of the floor space. The algae in the tank were absorbing carbon dioxide from the Wheel's air and producing fifty times their own volume of oxygen every hour.

Beyond the big tank was a smaller one in which flowers and vegetables were growing. An old man was puttering among them—not really old, but old by space-man's standards. He was fifty.

Lloyd saluted. "General Kovac!"

Kovac waved carelessly at him. "Relax, Lloyd. I'm just the gardener now. If Amos and I hadn't been young officers together, he'd never have let me retire to this job and you know it." His wrinkled face creased in a smile. "Thanks, though."

Lloyd smiled back. "I wondered, Max, if maybe you could spare me some flowers."

Kovac picked up a box wrapped in thick padding. "All boxed and insulated. Gardenias, Amos said."

Lloyd took the box and looked down at it, biting his lower lip. "Gardenias. You and Amos—"

"Shut up now," Kovac snapped. "Don't want to hear any more about it. Neither does Amos. Tell Terry not to be a fool."

"Thanks, Max. I'll try."

The recreation room of the cot-

tage was empty. Lloyd wondered where the boys were. He unwrapped the insulation from the box and opened it. The gardenias were as fresh and white as if they had been just picked on Earth. Lloyd looked down at them, took a deep breath, and lifted the door to the living room.

Terry looked up as he came down the ladder. She was ironing a frilly dress. She started to say something and stopped. Lloyd dropped the last few feet and landed lightly. "For you," he said, presenting the gardenias.

Terry looked at the flowers, and her face crumpled. Blindly she held out her hand to take them. She raised them to her face and breathed in their fragrance.

"Oh, Lloyd," she said. "They're beautiful."

Lloyd said, "Not as beautiful as you." His voice was husky.

Terry's face was flushed. "I don't know what to say."

"Don't say anything. If I brought you flowers every time I wanted to say 'I love you' there'd be no room in the cottage for us. I do love you, Terry. More than anything. More than my job. If you want to go inside—I'll go with you."

"Oh, Lloyd!" She brushed her eyes with the back of one hand. "I do sound like a fool, don't I? You know I wouldn't take you away. I just—I just want to feel needed."

"If you should leave me," Lloyd said, "the stars might as well fall out of the sky."

She looked at him searchingly. "I almost believe you mean that. Oh, I will believe it. Lloyd!" She put her arms around him and squeezed him tightly to her. "I'm so happy."

He could feel her heart beating against his chest, hard and fast. He thought, *If only I wasn't a psychologist, if I could stop analyzing myself and everyone around me, if I could act blindly instead of always the right way. Well, he thought, don't you love her? Yes. Yes!*

Her face was raised to his, her eyes closed. His mouth descended on hers, hard and demanding. Her lips parted.

When he raised his head the words were tumbling out, "Terry, we're going to throw the nine cottages together with the tenth in the middle for a recreation center. You'll have a chance to see the other women oftener. There'll be dances, card parties, movies, all kinds of get-togethers. We'll have a real community—"

She put a finger across his lips and murmured, "That's fine, honey. That's wonderful." He kissed her again.

With that communion of marriage that sometimes makes explanations unnecessary, he said irreverently, "What about the boys?"

"They're taking a nap," she

whispered, clinging to him.

He picked her up and carried her easily toward the bedroom. She opened her eyes and whispered, "The iron, honey."

Swearing, he stormed back across the room, yanked out the cord with a jerk, and stamped back toward the bedroom.

Terry sighed. She was smiling.

X

One hundred and ninety-seven days out. The *Santa Maria* swept on through space with its animate and inanimate cargo. Earth was far behind now. Mars was appreciably closer—it showed a perceptible disk.

Holloway was lying in his bunk. He was propped up by a ripped piece of padding against the pressure of his belt so that he could stare out the port. He was much thinner. His eyes were burned holes in the blank sheet of his face.

Barr was taped to the framework of his bunk. Migliardo clung with one leg to a stanchion beside it. He was trying to feed Barr cut-up steak from a covered dish with a pair of tongs. Migliardo put a bite of meat into Barr's mouth. Barr spat it out.

"You're trying to poison me!" Barr screamed. "I ain't gonna eat it. I ain't gonna eat anything! You're trying to get rid of me."

"Iron," Migliardo said patiently,

grabbing the bit of meat out of the air and holding it in his hand, "you saw me get the meal out of the freezer. You saw me put it in the range. You saw me take it out and bring it over here. If you don't eat, you'll die for sure."

Barr's body flopped in the air as he struggled against the tape that bound him to the bunk, but he could get no leverage. Even Barr was gaunt. "I ain't gonna eat!" he shouted. "And I ain't gonna die. One of these days I'm gonna get loose, and I'm gonna kill every one of you—you and Emil and Burt and Ted and—Everybody but Shepherd. He's nice to me. . . ."

Migliardo sighed and pushed away. He scraped the food into the garbage ejector and floated to the pole, Barr's hysterical obscenities following inexorably. He pulled himself to the control deck. Jelinek was sitting in the navigator's chair. He was sighting at Mars through the telescope.

"Emil," Migliardo said.

Jelinek jumped and banged his eye on the eyepiece of the telescope. He looked around, rubbing his eye.

"What are you doing?"

Jelinek grinned sheepishly. "Practicing my navigation. Burt isn't going to be much help, and if something should happen—"

"To me?" Migliardo nodded. "Good idea. I guess I should practice my piloting. But I never was

much of a pilot. Anyway, there's Shepherd."

They looked at each other steadily, considering all the possibilities. Migliardo's face relaxed. "We're going to get through, hey, Emil?"

"You and me and Shepherd."

"You know, I was never what you would call a good Catholic, but I've been praying lately. Shepherd and me. Maybe it's helped."

"Maybe. But don't forget that the Lord helps those who help themselves. How are the engines?"

"Number two rigid-mount is pitted, but it should stand up under one more firing easily—two if we're lucky."

Barr was still screaming. Migliardo listened for a moment. He said, "I don't know how much longer I can take it, Emil. Night and day that goes on. You can't get away from it. Doesn't he ever sleep?"

"He takes catnaps all day long. We don't notice. We should be like Burt. He doesn't notice anything." Jelinek studied Migliardo. "He's bound to weaken. He hasn't eaten for a week, and if we tried to feed him intravenously like Burt, he'd tear out the scoop."

Migliardo listened to Barr and shivered. "Anything we can do?"

"I ran out of morphine a month ago; reserpine doesn't help. Besides, he thinks he's being poisoned."

Migliardo rubbed his mouth

nervously. "It's like taking care of a baby, feeding him, washing him, bringing him bedpans. Only a baby can't talk."

"I'd spell you, Mig—you know that. But it only makes him worse. He's more afraid of me."

Migliardo bit his lower lip. "Sure. Sorry. Sometimes it just gets too much for me—" He turned his head to listen. "There! He stopped." His expression changed. "That was quick. Too quick. I'll go check."

He slid along the pole. There was a brief period of silence and then Migliardo's horrified shouts, "Emil! For God's sake, Emil!"

There was a red haze in the living deck. Red droplets floated in the air. Barr was lying in his bunk, his jugular vein still spurt-ing blood into the air. Jelinek caught the bunk's framework and pressed his hand to the three-inch, horizontal slash in Barr's throat, but the pumping had already slowed. It stopped as Jelinek fumbled for the vein. Barr was dead.

Barr's eyes were open. In them was a mixture of terror and hatred. The door to the locker beside his head was standing open. His right arm was free. In his right hand was a razor-sharp clasp knife. The knife and the hand were covered with blood. His whole body was bathed in blood.

So was Migliardo, who clung to the bunk beside Jelinek. Between

red smears, his face was white.

"It's all over, Mig," Jelinek said quietly. "Better clean up."

Migliardo said slowly, "I never knew a man had so much blood in him." He seemed unable to move.

Jelinek pushed him toward the shower stall. "Go sponge off. And put those shorts in the ejector." When he heard the brief hiss of water from the stall, Jelinek drifted to his bunk and took a towel from his locker. Slowly he wiped the blood from his hand. "Did you see anything, Burt?"

Holloway was staring out the port. "No," he said distantly, "I haven't seen anything. Only the stars. Earth is still a long ways off. Sometimes I don't think we will ever get there. I think maybe Earth is just a dream I dreamed one night, and there isn't really an Earth at all. Or maybe I'm just a dream someone else is dreaming. Then it wouldn't matter. Dreams don't matter." His voice trailed away.

The red fog was gone, sucked away through the air-conditioning intakes, but many spherical red drops still floated aimlessly in the air. Methodically Jelinek slapped at them with the towel. When there were only minute droplets that air movement would take care of, Jelinek tied the stained towel around Barr's neck and closed the staring eyes.

Migliardo came out of the

shower stall, clean, naked, and very pale. The room was oppressively silent as he went to his locker for a pair of shorts.

Jelinek said, "Barr's better off now. He was incurable, even if we could have got him back to Earth. Let's get him to the storage deck."

They towed the body to the pole and along it to the deck next to the airlock door. "Shepherd?" Jelinek said.

They stood there, Jelinek and Migliardo, their heads bowed above Barr's restless body. After a few moments they looked up. Jelinek said, "Thanks, Shepherd. Mig?"

Migliardo nodded silently and began putting on his suit.

"When you get back," Jelinek said, "you and Shepherd better clean up the splashes. Get rid of the bunk canvas through the ejector. I'm going back on watch."

Migliardo nodded again and lowered his helmet over his head. Jelinek adjusted the wing nuts and then went along the pole toward the control deck. As he passed the living deck, he looked slowly around the deck and frowned. Then he continued along the pole.

XI

Without turning on the lights, Lloyd said to the two heads between him and the screen, "The two hundred and sixtieth day film

has just been processed. Shall we run it?"

Danton said hoarsely, "Yes. It will tell the story."

Faust said, "Run it."

The film flickered on the screen.

XII

Two hundred and sixty days out. In front of the *Santa Maria*, Mars was a vast disk, glowing red and white and green. It was 8,500 miles away. The canals were clearly visible, natural faults in the Martian crust through which fog rolled from the south pole. The surface seemed to rotate with ever-increasing speed.

Ignition was sixty-four minutes away.

Migliardo was sitting in the table slings reading a book bound in black leather. It was a Bible.

Jelinek was floating beside Holloway's bunk. The navigator's eyes were closed. His chest scarcely seemed to move. Jelinek held his wrist and counted to himself. Finally he nodded in the silence and glanced at the clock. "Sixty-two minutes until ignition. We'd better get busy, Mig."

Migliardo did not look up. "Shepherd will take care of it."

"Mig—" Jelinek began and hesitated. "I've been going through the log, Mig. I can't find any mention of Shepherd before one hundred and twelve days out."

Migliardo shrugged. "You made a mistake."

"No. I was surprised. I checked twice. Mig, what does Shepherd look like?"

Migliardo kept on reading. "You know what he looks like. He's got a beard. Sad, deepset eyes—"

"A sort of towel wrapped around his hips?"

"Of course not," Migliardo said. "He wears khaki shorts like the rest of us."

Jelinek sighed and drifted toward Migliardo. "So he does. It's amazing he should look the same to both of us."

"Why? That's how he looks."

Jelinek caught the edge of the table and brought his face close to Migliardo's. "Because, Mig, he really isn't there."

Migliardo looked up sharply. "Don't say that, Emil! We're jittery enough as it is. Don't you crack on us!"

"Think back, Mig," Jelinek said softly. "A long, long way. Back to the moment when we boarded this ship from the Little Wheel. Phillips had said good-by, Danton had said good-by; we were all alone, now, and the taxi had taken us to the *Santa Maria*, and we were there where we would live, some of us, for two and a half years. Who was there, Mig?"

Migliardo's forehead furrowed. "You and me and Iron and Burt and Ted and—and—" He looked

at Jelinek with wide, dark eyes. "Shepherd wasn't there."

"When did he get on, Mig?"

"How could he get on after we had started, Emil? He wasn't there and now he is. That's all."

"Guess for me, Mig. What is Shepherd?"

"You guess."

"I'll tell you something else I've been checking on. The supplies. Just the two of us have been eating, Mig. Just the three of us, counting Burt, have been breathing and drinking. Shepherd doesn't eat or drink or breathe."

"What would I call him? A mass hallucination, whatever that might be. The manifestation of a deep-felt need triggered by certain instructions given us and perhaps by a post-hypnotic suggestion. But I don't think it was planned."

Migliardo said, "That's just witch doctor stuff, Emil."

Jelinek nodded. "True. But the subconscious plays some funny tricks. Now you guess for me."

"You're wrong about the first mention of Shepherd. What about the face Burt saw through the port? What about the stowaway Ted saw?"

"That would make him something—not human."

"Whatever he is, he's not human. How do we know what waits for man in interplanetary space?"

"That's not your best guess, Mig."

"My best guess isn't a guess; it's a faith. Why do we call him Shepherd? Did he tell us? Did one of us name him? Or was it something else that just came to us?"

"You tell me."

Migliardo said softly. "The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters. He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake. Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil."

"That's a good guess, Mig," Jelinek said slowly. "Maybe better than mine. It has all the stigmata of a psychological truth and contact points with experience—the still waters and the valley of the shadow of death. I wish I wasn't such a skeptic. I'd like to pray with you and Shepherd. The trouble is—I haven't seen Shepherd lately."

"Emil—I" Migliardo began. "I've been wanting to tell you something for a long time."

"Confession?" Jelinek asked gently.

"In more ways than one. I killed Barr."

"I know you did. The tape that held his wrist was cut, not torn. He couldn't have cut it until he had the knife, and he couldn't get the knife until his hand was free. Besides, Barr would never have committed suicide. He would have

cut loose his other hand and come after us."

Migliardo put his hand across his eyes. "He was my friend."

"It was what he would have wanted a friend to do—if he had been sane enough to know a friend. There are none of us innocent, Mig." Jelinek looked at the clock. "Twenty-five minutes until ignition."

An expression of concern crossed Migliardo's face. "If Shepherd isn't real, then we can't—He's on the control deck, isn't he, Emil?"

Jelinek frowned. "I don't know. I haven't seen him lately."

Migliardo was already pulling his legs free of the slings. He swung along the pole hastily and stopped with his head just beyond the partition. "Shepherd! Emil, he's gone!" He came back along the pole and searched the living deck with dark, frightened eyes. "Shepherd! Shepherd!"

He kept on moving along the pole until he reached the storage deck. "Shepherd!" he called. And despairingly, "Shepherd?"

Suddenly Jelinek moved. "Mig!" He leaped toward the pole.

"Shepherd!" Migliardo called once more and then the airlock door clanged shut. Before Jelinek could reach the door, he heard the hissing sound of air escaping.

Jelinek turned, gnawing his mustache, and opened the lockers along the wall. Migliardo's suit

was there. So were the other four. Jelinek looked at the airlock door and said softly, "So long, Mig. I hope you find him."

With a great weariness, he pulled himself along the pole to the living deck. There was a great silence in the ship, a silence alive and unbearable. Jelinek looked at the clock. Twenty minutes until ignition. He looked at Holloway. He could barely see his chest move.

"The silence," he muttered. "That's the worst."

He floated to Holloway and felt his pulse again. He frowned, turned to a cabinet set in the wall, and withdrew one end of a coil of plastic tubing. There was a needle on the end of it. Jelinek found a vein on Holloway's arm, inserted the needle, and turned on the tiny motor that forced the sugar solution drop by drop into Holloway's vein.

Jelinek floated to his locker, opened it, and removed a hypodermic already filled with a clear liquid. He studied it for a moment, looked at Holloway, and then looked at the clock. Fifteen minutes until ignition.

He tossed the hypodermic back into the locker and slammed the door. He pulled himself swiftly along the pole to the control deck and strapped himself into the captain's chair. His eyes ran over the master controls, his fingers hovering over the control board. Ten

minutes more. Not enough time.

Suddenly there came the sound of pumps churning and water surging. Jelinek looked down at his fingers. They had not touched the control board.

There was a series of small explosions somewhere in the ship, like firecrackers in the distance on the Fourth of July. Jelinek listened. Somewhere motors started and flywheels turned. Mars slowly began to slip away from the astro-gation dome as the ship turned. Through a porthole in the side Jelinek could see a giant white globe floating gently away. It was an empty fuel tank.

Jelinek smiled suddenly and took his hand away from the control board. "Ah, there, Shepherd!"

Mars appeared in the living-deck porthole by Holloway's bunk. It filled it completely, a spinning red, white, and green sphere.

Holloway pushed himself upright in his bunk, his eyes open, a shaky finger pointing. From that arm the plastic tube dangled and swung. "Earth!" Holloway shouted. His eyelids flickered. His eyes rolled back. Slowly, under the pressure of his belt straps, he sank toward the bunk. When he was parallel with it again, his chest was not moving.

"Burt!" Jelinek called from the control deck. He did not call again. The speaker imbedded in the stanchion by Holloway's bunk was utterly silent. "You weren't so

bad a navigator, Burt. After all, Columbus never knew he had discovered the New World."

He stared around the room, watching the lights winking and changing color, the dials turning, the ship silhouette on the artificial horizon slowly changing shape. The control deck was alive. . . .

He listened to the sounds it made, the cluckings and the tickings, the whines and the creaks. He smelled the air, all the mingled, ineradicable stinks of men sweating and breathing and eliminating, as if he were smelling it for the first time in a long while, and the smell was sweet. He ran his hands along the chair arms.

He put his hand over the control panel and pressed the button marked "Air Conditioner—Stop." One of the sounds—a whisper—was no more. He then pressed the button beside it: "Air—Eject." A red light sprang to life on the control board; a thin whistling noise began.

"Lloyd," Jelinek said softly, "I suppose you're watching. You never told me, but I guess that's the way it had to be. I hope you've learned something." He chuckled; it was almost a happy sound. "Perhaps to pick a better psychologist."

His voice changed, sobered. "I'm sorry, Lloyd. I couldn't face it—the loneliness and the silence. I think the silence was worst of all.

"Tell Amos—the crew was a

failure—but the ship was a success. And tell him—there'll be a ship—out here—in good working order—with fuel and supplies—if anyone—ever makes it. . . ."

After a little the whistling stopped and the air was gone. On the control deck two blind eyes looked out at the circling stars and two deaf ears listened to the sound of rocket engines screaming. . . .

XIII

The silence in the little room was almost as unbearable as that aboard the *Santa Maria*. Lloyd had forgotten to turn on the lights. Nobody noticed; nobody said anything. When Lloyd finally remembered, Danton was still clutching the arms of his chair in knuckle-whitened hands, tears rolling down his face unashamedly.

Faust was shading his eyes with his hands. "So," he said finally, "I must prepare for the worst. There is little time."

Lloyd's voice sounded strange to him. "What could you do with two years?"

Faust looked up quickly. His eyes, too, were damp. "Where would we get two years?"

"The ship isn't expected back until then."

"How could you fake it that long?"

Lloyd said methodically, "The *Santa Maria* has taken up its orbit

around Mars, six hundred and twenty miles up. It will be sending back telemetered reports from its telescopic examination of the surface, from its sounding missiles, and there are even several missiles equipped to land on Mars, conduct geological explorations within a limited radius, analyze samples, and telemeter back their findings.

"That was our safety factor—apart from special, unlikely emergencies such as that meteor damage, the ship alone was capable of making the trip and doing the job. Subconsciously the men realized it. They personified the ship; they called it Shepherd. It wasn't enough. . . ."

Lloyd stopped, then began again. "The ship's reports will give us something to announce from time to time. As far as the crew is concerned, we don't *have* to know about it. If we need more time still, we can announce that the ship will wait for the next favorable opportunity to return."

"Too many people know. You couldn't keep it a secret."

Lloyd sighed. "We're used to keeping secrets, aren't we, Amos? The men who are working on the films will be here until we're ready to release the information. They have years of work ahead of them."

"Maybe it could be done," Faust admitted, "but why? Do you think you can pick a better crew

—one that will succeed where those men failed?"

Danton's voice was cold and harsh.

"Those were the best!"

"Then where are you going to get the spacemen?" Faust asked gently.

"We aren't," Danton said fiercely. "Turn on that still of the *Santa Maria*!" The picture of the ship appeared on the screen, silvery white and fragile. "There's your spaceman. That's all there will ever be—packed solid with usable stuff. No neuroses, no tummy aches, no weakness, no indecision, no space-madness. It doesn't need oxygen, food, or water, medicine, sterilizers, entertainment, and the rest of the junk we have to have to survive. Just servo-mechanisms and telemetering devices. Robots. There's your spaceman. He can travel anywhere, sense almost everything, do almost anything, and never worry about coming back. . . ."

Faust shook his head.

"No, Amos," Lloyd said, "it won't do. As a research tool, it's fine. As a symbol it just won't do. Men's representatives, meaningful representatives, must be living, breathing, fearful men like themselves. They've got to be men doing something the people who are left behind think they could have done, given the opportunity—men whose doings give them glory. You told me that once, Amos.

Do you remember? I've never forgotten."

Faust said slowly, "How long do you need?"

"Eight years maybe. Ten years for sure."

"That's a long time."

"Mars will wait."

"Where are you going to get them," Faust asked, "these spacemen?"

Lloyd knew that he had his ten years. "If we can't find them readymade, we'll have to make them ourselves."

XIV

In the airlock of the cottage, Lloyd extracted himself from his suit, picked up his insulated box, and opened the inner door. Two squirming bundles of exuberance launched themselves at him, plastic helmets on their dark heads, ray guns in their hands, shouting their welcomes, "Daddy, you're home early! Play spaceman with us! Hey, Daddy?"

"Hello," Lloyd said gently. "Hello, spacemen."



THE CORPSE IN YOUR BED IS ME

by WALTER M. MILLER, JR. & LINCOLN BOONE

Snyder was a top comedian, and we hated his guts.

That pleased Snyder.

Freddy the Martian thought he was hiffling sad.

That killed Snyder. . . .

IT WAS BACK AROUND 2045, I think. The West Coast was infested with Martin Snyder fan clubs in those days, but our club was a little different. We called it the *I Hate Snyder's Guts Club*. Its members were Snyder's supporting cast, Snyder's production people, and a few technical men who worked for the network. Oh yes, and Snyder—he belonged to it too. "No one can possibly hate me as much as I hate myself," he said with icy arrogance when he found out about the group, "and I demand to be admitted as a member."

We elected him president. He presided over most of our weekly meetings in the back room of the Bongo Bar, just across the street from the telecast studio, and just after the *Martin Snyder Hour*. The main business on the agenda was gin, How-Rotten-Was-the-Show, and hating Snyder's guts. The club's name was no gag. Snyder, of course, pretended it was.

We hated the man, not the comedian. As a comedian, he was on his way to join the ranks of Comedy's Immortals. As a man, he was a bully. He had the savage instincts of a fighter, but the physique of a consumptive vegetarian just released from a concentration camp. I like to think that as a kid, Snyder was maybe *The Boy Anybody Can Whip Anytime*, and that he compensated for it with comedy. "You can lick me, but I can make you laugh when I push your button," he might have thought, "and that makes you a jack-in-the-box."

As a grown man, he still seemed to think that way. "I can make you laugh anytime I want you to laugh," he would boast, "and at a bumpkin's joke at that." And what's more, he could do it.

And then he would groan: "Please! Won't somebody find me a sensible fellow who doesn't have to laugh like an idiot whenever I open my mouth? If he can sneer

at my dull material, I'll pay a bounty for him! I'll *breed* the scoundrel! We'll raise the master race."

Plenty of people had tried to call his hand, but Snyder had never lost a bet. By usage, the wager had acquired the form of a contest. The challenger must be sober, mentally competent, English-speaking, and not deaf, dumb, or blind. He must sit with an audience of at least four others who would laugh as they pleased while Snyder ran through a monolog. If he could sit attentive but poker-faced for three minutes, the challenger won the bet. But no challenger ever won . . .

Until we found Freddy.

Freddy was a Martian. Freddy fitted the conditions of the contest, as Snyder was unhappily forced to admit. He spoke English—with a lisp. He was mentally competent—in his own way. And he had the sense of humor for which his species is widely known. "That," said Snyder later, "is the hell of it."

We had been hating Snyder's guts with more than usual intensity for several weeks, mostly because of Felicity Larkin. Felicity was script editor for the show, and everyone loved her with one variety of love or another. Except Snyder, of course. Nick Sheldon had been after her to marry him, but Felicity—alone among the cast and crew—had eyes for no

man but Martin Snyder. She worshipped the arrogant clown. Perhaps she saw something beyond the brittle exterior that none of the rest of us saw. Or perhaps she only thought she did. Snyder scarcely acknowledged her existence. And Nick Sheldon, after a long and trying courtship, got her to say "yes." Snyder, however, said "no." If they married, he would fire them both. They decided to postpone it a while. As soon as he got the chance, Snyder made love to Felicity. And as soon as he had gotten her safely away from Nick, he dropped her. She protested. He fired her. A month later, she married Nick. Snyder fired Nick. And that was the end of it, except that we hated his guts a little more.

Freddy seemed like a way to hurt him without hurting the show, which was our meal ticket as well as Snyder's.

Joe Grayber found Freddy behind a soda fountain not far from Hollywood and Vine when he stopped there for a bromo one night. Joe was our technical director, which explains his frequent need of a bromo. When he walked in, the soda counter was empty and Freddy was watching the *Laugh of Your Life* show—it rated close to Snyder's then—on a portable set while he sat on the freezer and nibbled dainties. The dainties were gummy little cubes. He plucked them out of a box

labelled GROOVER'S SUPER-ATOMIC RAT POISON—*Sure Death in Ten Seconds to Pests.* He tried to set it out of sight when Joe came in, but saw Joe gaping at it and shrugged.

"Try one," he whinnied in that odd Martian voice. "Very delithi-outh." (Remember for yourself, after this, that he lisps.) He offered Joe the box across the counter. Joe recoiled. "Don't worry," said Freddy. "I can mix you the antidote for a quarter. Either cherry or lime."

"Thanks," said Joe. "I'll take a bromo, if you don't mind."

Freddy shrugged and turned to get it.

"Wash your hands first!" Joe yelped. "Get that sticky candy off."

Freddy helped himself to another of Groover's gumdrops, then washed his hands. "Not candy," he confided. "Medicine. I need more phosphorous on Earth than I do back home. The extra arsenic helps too. Boss doesn't like it on duty. Won't tell?"

"Won't tell."

"Hoo hoo hoo!" Freddy's laugh made Joe Grayber shudder. It made no sense, and reminded him of an owl hooting into a rain barrel. He sipped his bromo and eyed Freddy.

It might occur to some people—mostly to those who have seen Martians only in photographs—that Freddy would be an unappe-

tizing thing to see behind a soda counter, and not exactly good for business. True, the Martian skin is mottled brown and yellow, slick and hairless. The eyes are like the eyes of the great horned owl—lemon colored irises with little white showing, and very round. But as the Martian explorers frequently remarked after the first expeditions to that planet, a live Martian has a certain edible look. One might think of Freddy lightly fried in olive oil and served up with herbs and a red wine sauce.

"Hiffle," said Freddy, watching the *Laugh of Your Life* show. "Hiffle hiffle hiffle . . ."

Joe Grayber sat suddenly straighter. "What did you say?"

"Nothing. I was only hiffing."

Grayber rubbed his chin and tried to think. A Martian hiffled at Martian funerals. It was not an expression of grief like crying, however. There was no precise human equivalent of it. It was a release, like laughter or tears, but the emotion behind it was not felt nor understood by humans. It seemed allied with sadness, boredom, indignation, pity, and aloofness—but it did not seem unpleasant to them.

Joe listened more closely to the program. The comedian came to a punch line. The audience laughed.

"Hiffle," said Freddy, and ate another bite of rat poison.

"Listen," said Joe, leaning eag-

erly across the counter. "Do you ever watch the Martin Snyder show?"

"Oh no!" said Freddy. "He's too sad. He's even sadder than this guy."

Joe pulled out his wallet and extracted a pair of twenties. He waved them toward the Martian. "Like to make a little of this stuff?" he asked.

"Hoo!" Freddy hooted. "Hoo hoo hoo."

Snyder was rather cross about the whole thing. "How do I know Martians even laugh?" he snapped. "Undoubtedly Martians have no funnybone or you wouldn't even have thought of it."

Joe handed him a pamphlet. "Look this over and you'll change your mind. It's a translation of a Martian joke scroll I picked up at the library. Better study it. We invited Freddy over tonight."

"After the *show*?" Snyder quickly thumbed through the book, stopped to read snatches here and there. "But there's nothing funny here!"

"So what? You always said your material isn't funny. He's coming, anyhow. He wants to bet. We don't own the Bongo Bar. You don't have to bet him just because he's there, of course."

Snyder was at his best during that night's show. His voice was honey laced with battery acid. When he told a story, the butt of

it was usually the common citizen, but Snyder made him seem such a sub-human automaton and so incredibly stupid that the common citizen laughed heartily and failed to recognize himself.

Snyder wore a monocle during the show, and used it to punctuate his monologs. It seemed to fit his haughty personality and his thin arrogant face. It had become his trademark. When he approached the climax of a joke, he removed the monocle from his eye. When he came to the gag line, he paused to breathe on the lens before he delivered the pitch. Then while the audience laughed, he polished it on his sleeve.

There was nothing funny about the monocle ritual in itself, but it was a cue.

One night, he had stood before the cameras and looked around at the studio audience without saying anything for thirty seconds. At last he removed his monocle. The audience seemed to tense. He held it up to his lips and breathed a silent *hah!* on the lens. He snorted at them, then polished the lens on his sleeve. The audience roared.

"My, you'll drool at anything tonight," Snyder told them pleasantly. . . .

"Pavlovian dogs!" he remarked after the show. "I *told* you they'll laugh at anything. They'll even laugh at nothing. You see?"

He never tried it again. A new

viewer would not laugh, and an old Snyder fan might be annoyed at realizing he had laughed by a conditioned reflex. Snyder used it on us instead. Infuriatingly, it worked. We were conditioned. He used it on us again that night.

About a dozen members of the *I Hate Snyder Club* had already convened at the Bongo after the show. Freddy was there, but Snyder was late. We dragged four tables together and sat around sipping drinks and nervously eyeing Freddy while he munched rat killers and blinked owlishly at the neon. He could not drink in the humidity of Earth's atmosphere.

Coreen tried to get Freddy to talk about himself, with only dubious success. His remarks often seemed weird, startling, or incongruous to a human. Several times we thought he was being extremely witty, and laughed, only to notice that the laughter hurt his feelings, or shocked him. We did not understand a Martian. And although Freddy had been three years on Earth, it was clear that he did not understand us.

He had wanted to see the sights of the third planet, and had come here on a thirteen-week NGN contract when they were hiring Martian extras for the filming of *Brides of a Martian Harem* in the Nevada Desert. He had been assured by a shady talent scout that the producer would exercise the

contract's option and extend the contract to a year. The producer had not done so. Freddy lacked the wherewithal to buy a ticket home. If he lived frugally as a soda jerk, he calculated that he might save enough to go home after fourteen years.

This made Coreen very sad. She sniffled and patted his four-jointed arm. Freddy looked at her in surprise and blew thin wisps of smoke from both ears. He had not been smoking. He took her hand and bent over it with his lips pursed out into a conical shape as if he meant to kiss it. A quiver passed over him, and then he spat a pearl into her palm. At least it looked like a pearl. Later we learned that it was Martian equivalent of a kidney stone. Coreen accepted it as a gift, with only a small shudder, and even thanked him for it. Later we learned that it was a rebuke for what Freddy thought was an insult.

Snyder came in late and took a seat at the end of the table. He was still wearing his monocle and traces of make-up. He smiled haughtily over us and looked at Freddy. Freddy blinked at him.

"Hiffle," he said.

Snyder scrutinized him, readjusting his monocle. "Hiffle yourself. Whose little delirium tremen are you? This is the *I Hate Snyder Club*, sonny. You've got the wrong place."

Freddy hiffled again and ate a

cube of rat killer. Snyder saw the box and jumped a bit.

"Clever gag, Catmeat," he said. "I could use you on the show sometime." It was the first time I had ever heard Snyder pay anyone a compliment. He quickly dropped all awareness of Freddy and looked around at the rest of us. "The meeting is now in session. We will now bow our heads for two minutes of solemn silent hatred for Martin Snyder. All together now—hate Martin Snyder."

We all sat there and glowered at him. Loftily imperious, he sat drumming a forefinger and eyeing us critically. After fifteen seconds, he removed his monocle. We all stiffened. He blew on the lens. Coreen giggled. Freddy hiffled. Coreen giggled again. The giggle triggered it. We all laughed while Snyder polished the monocle on his sleeve and looked disgusted.

"Idiots! At least you could have the decency to hate me silently for two short minutes. Or even a minute." He glanced peculiarly at Freddy.

"You see? It's indecent. What would you do for it if you were me?"

Freddy shoved the rat poison at him.

Involuntarily Snyder laughed. It was only an explosive snort, but it was a laugh. We all stared at him in amazement. Freddy hiffled and looked sad.

"That sound he makes—is that a laugh?" Snyder wanted to know.

Grayber shook his head. "Laugh for him, Freddy?"

"Can't," said the Martian. "Nothing funny."

"Like crying, you mean?" asked Coreen. "Most people can't cry unless there's really something sad."

"Same opposite. You make stupid remarks. Congratulations." Freddy said it to her almost admiringly. Coreen blinked and looked baffled.

"I want to hear him laugh," said Snyder.

"Do something funny," Freddy suggested helpfully.

"Wait!" Grayber interrupted. "I want to lay a bet. I want to make it for Freddy. He doesn't dig our gambling. I want to bet fifty bucks you can't make him laugh in three minutes." He turned to Freddy. "I'll pay you fifty dollars for not laughing. You understand that, don't you?"

"Hoo hoo hoo! I dig."

"There, Snyder, you heard him! I don't know what I said that was funny, but you heard him laugh. Satisfied?"

Snyder looked around at the eager fury in a dozen faces and gathered his arrogance about him. "You little dullwits really believe I can't make this codfish hoot, don't you? Very well, you are about to be chastened. Grayber, consult your timepiece."

The director laid his watch on the table. "Time," he said finally.

Snyder went into his routine. It was one of his old monologs, and I recognized it as the classic performance that had put him on the way to fame. He spoke directly to Freddy with that intimate confidential contempt that is his specialty. Within thirty seconds, we were all roaring and pounding the table with glee.

Freddy merely hiffled.

I watched Snyder for nervousness, but there was no sign of it. He was perfectly in character and completely self-assured.

"Hiffle hiffle hiffle . . ."

"Time!" snapped Grayber.

"Hiff-hiff-hiffle," said Freddy.

It took Snyder about ten seconds to sink out of the comedian role. While he sank out of it, he went slowly livid. He seethed with hate.

"So very touching," said Freddy. "It was beautiful, Mister Snyder. Hiffle." He meant it too. We all laughed.

Snyder seemed to shrink to half his size. He looked around at us with blank eyes.

"Pay off," said Grayber.

Snyder stood up. His throat was working. "You bastards!" he shouted. "You're fired! All of you! Do you hear?"

"Pay off, Snyder."

He snatched out his wallet and flung it down on the table. He stalked out.

"Are we really fired?" Coreen asked.

"Don't be silly, doll," Grayber told her with a smile. "What would he do for a show?" He paid Freddy out of Snyder's wallet and gave it to Coreen to hold for the boss.

We went home that night feeling triumphant but somehow uncomfortable. It was a little like kicking a dog.

We saw nothing of Snyder for three days. He was missing at the first rehearsal for the next week's show. He showed up at the second rehearsal looking haggard. He needed a shave. His arrogance was still with him, but there was a defensive irritability about it that made him a little pathetic. It was the worst rehearsal we ever had.

The next rehearsal was dress, and it came off no better. Snyder sat around between scenes reading the translation of the Martian joke scroll and shaking his head over it. He asked Grayber for Freddy's address.

"Sure, but why?"

"You really gave me the business," Snyder told him. "I wasn't prepared. What's funny to a Martian is something else. I've been studying up on them. I can get a laugh out of that creep any time I want to."

"Sure."

"Look, Gray, it's like this. I'll pay you fifty dollars for not laugh-

ing,' you told him. He thought that was funny—to get paid for a *not*. I think I've got their humor figured out."

It was preying on Snyder. It was preying on him during the show that week. The studio audience roared just as loudly as usual, but it was purely conditioned reflex. We sat in the production booth and held our hands over our eyes and groaned. Snyder was pathetic. It was the worst night in years.

The next week's show was nearly as bad. Snyder had worked hard on it, and there had been two very hopeful rehearsals. But when he got up before the cameras and the audience, he seemed to wilt. The audience laughed as much as usual, but there was only ominous silence in the production booth.

There was gloom at the Bongo Bar that night. Snyder didn't show up. He never came to another club meeting after the affair with Freddy. We stopped calling them "club meetings" anyhow.

"Maybe he'll snap out of it next time," I said. "He can't stay in a stew about it forever."

"I just found out something," Grayber told me. "He's seeing Freddy. They've gotten together three times since it happened. Real pally, see? But he still can't get a chuckle out of that guy."

I whistled. "That sounds bad, Gray."

"Yeah? Well, that's not the worst of it. Freddy's taken to watching the show. And Snyder *knows* he's watching it."

"And hiffling."

"And hiffling."

"We ought to take up a collection and send Freddy back where he came from, Gray. If Snyder goes on many more weeks like this, we'll be out of work."

"Hah! You know what's the price of passage to Mars?"

"Well, maybe we could pay him to leave town."

We tried it the next day. It was too late. Freddy was quitting his job. Snyder had hired him as a chauffeur at double his drug-store salary. Grayber and I just groaned.

After four weeks, we knew the show was on the skids. The clients knew it, the agency knew it, and the network knew it. Everyone but the audience knew it, and they would catch on soon. Conditioned behavior could not sustain it forever. It was decided the only thing to do about it for the moment was to cut down on Snyder's camera time and play up the musicals, variety acts, and skits, until the star's slump had passed. Reluctantly, Snyder consented. But we all knew it couldn't go on for long without his personality to tie it together.

"It's Freddy that's doing it to you, Snyder," Grayber told him. "Get away from that guy. Fire

him. Give him two months pay and . . ."

Snyder exploded. I never saw him so furious. Freddy was his friend, his bosom chum, his own very special affinity. Besides, Freddy laughed at him now, and so Grayber's theory was all wet.

"That's a lie," Grayber told me when Snyder was gone. "I saw them sitting on a bench in the park the other day. Snyder was telling jokes and Freddy was hiffling. Snyder had tears in his eyes. Oh, Freddy laughs now and then when Snyder says something, but never when Snyder means for him to laugh, and never at a joke. It's driving him batty."

"And driving us out of a job."

The show kept slipping and the clients became ominously silent, but nothing happened. It went on for nine weeks that way.

Snyder spent more time in the microfilm library than he spent at the studio. He studied Mars and the Martian's legends, customs, habits, and folkways. Frantically he sought a pattern in their humor.

"Look, Snyder," Grayber kept telling him, "nobody has *really* found out what human humor is yet. There are dozens of theories about humor, and the only impressive thing about any of them is—they're so damned humorless. You can't figure out what humor is in a Martian. You can't even say what it is in a man."

Snyder wouldn't listen. He tried telling Martian jokes. Freddy hiffled. He tried giving a hotfoot to a sleeping prop-man while Freddy looked on. Freddy hiffled. He tried shaggy dog stories, lewd yarns, practical jokes, and even degenerated to puns. Freddy was very touched by it all. He explained the point of every gag to Freddy after Freddy failed to laugh. Freddy saw the point, all right, saw it very clinically. The worst of it was that Freddy was beginning to condition Snyder. Freddy had only to open his box of rat poison and offer it to Snyder like popcorn, and Snyder would pound his knees and chortle. It worked like Snyder's monocle worked on us. Freddy didn't see what was funny about it, but he did it to hear Snyder laugh.

One day they were walking across the park and saw a group of children giving a play funeral to a dead puppy. They watched for awhile and Freddy began to laugh. To Snyder's consternation, Freddy laughed over the incident the rest of the afternoon.

Snyder got me by the lapels that night after rehearsal. "Listen!" he said. "I've finally figured it out. A Martian hiffles at a Martian funeral. He laughs at a funeral here. When it's done by humans, tragedy is comedy to him, and comedy is tragedy. See?"

"No." I didn't see. It didn't fit some of the facts.

"Idiot!" he snapped. "That's the way it is. There's a reversal at work somehow. It even works the other way a little. I scanned through some films of their stylized shadow-play tragedies. They were a little funny—to me. Not to Freddy. And their comedy leaves me feeling glum. I've got it figured now."

"Why tell me?"

He said he needed my help. He had a plan. It sounded crazy to me. He figured it was sure to get a laugh out of Freddy. I told him it wouldn't work. He blew up. Finally I agreed to go along. If he once got a laugh out of Freddy, it might salvage Snyder's ego and thereby save the show.

Snyder hired a couple of stage hands as accomplices, and for three days they kept calling Freddy's apartment and asking: "Are you the guy that keeps calling about shipping a dead body to Mars?" And Freddy would say, "No, who is this?"

"Solar Shipping Enterprises," the voice would answer. "Look, you'll have to show us the death certificate and the embalmer's record on it, or we can't handle it. Is it a Martian or a human, anyway?"

Freddy would hang up and "hiffle."

Finally Snyder manufactured a convincing Solar Shipping letterhead with the help of a handilith office printing machine and wrote

Freddy a letter saying that the death certificate and embalmer's receipt were in good order, and that the shipping men would pick up the casket at the time and place Freddy had allegedly designated.

We went over to Freddy's place that afternoon. Snyder had gotten a duplicate key somehow, and we let ourselves into the shabby two-room apartment the Martian called home. Snyder had brought with him a plastic sack filled with such props as he needed for the so-called "gag." He dumped it on the bed and we went to wrestle Freddy's wardrobe trunk out of the closet.

"How do you know he won't show up before we're ready?"

"I sent him on an errand, if you must know," Snyder said crossly. "He's to call me at the studio in half an hour. The girl who answers the phone will tell him I'm gone for the day. She'll tell him Solar Shipping just called for him, and that two men are on their way over here to pick up a trunk. He'll come running in about forty minutes from now."

I shrugged and we set about the job of unpacking the trunk and dumping its contents on the bed. We moved the trunk into the other room, closer to the entrance. We plastered the trunk with shipping labels: CONTENTS PERISHABLE, REFRIGERATE . . . USE NO HOOKS . . . SPECIAL

DELIVERY . . . and so on. The shipping tag was addressed to the chief matriarch of Freddy's home clan on the Mare Cimmerium. Some of the labels were in Martian, one of which Snyder affixed to the inside of the lid.

"Why on the *inside* of the box?" I asked him.

"It's a note to his clan matriarch," he said irritably.

"What does it say?"

"It says, 'Beloved Ancestress, I have discovered they are quite tasty. Try this one and see.' Then there's a recipe."

"For roast Snyder? Good Lord, and you think he'll find *that* funny?"

"I am quite certain of it. Now give me a hand."

We finished what we had to do. Snyder went into the bathroom with the make-up kit and came out in his underwear. He was chalk white from head to toe and covered with dried blood. He made a convincing corpse. When he crawled inside, I got the trunk closed and locked and tied with rope. It looked all ready to go. I went downstairs.

The two "Solar Shipping men" were waiting in the alley. "Go on up," I told them. "It's all set. He should be here in about five minutes."

It came out the way Snyder planned—up to a point.

Freddy came rushing in on schedule. When he got upstairs,

the two shipping men were pounding on his door, and arguing with each other.

"Lissen, I tell you this is where we get the stiff."

"You're mixed up, Joe. We get the trunk here. The coffin's at the other place."

"Hey! Owl face! Is this your joint?"

"My joint. Stupid confusion. Hiffle. I got nothing shipping out. Wrong place."

They stood aside while he unlocked the door and threw it open. He started inside, but stopped. There sat the trunk, brightly labelled for a long journey. Freddy blew twin jets of smoke from his ears.

"There it is!" said one of the porters and shouldered past Freddy into the room. "Come on, Joe. Let's get a move on."

"My trunk," said Freddy. "Not going to Mars. Gladly wish so. Stupid confusion. You wait." He rushed into the bedroom, saw the trunk's contents on the bed, and rushed back. The porters stood there undecided.

"The boss says pick it up . . ."

"Wait. See what's inside first. Is maximum confusion." Freddy began tearing off the ropes. He found the key and got it unlocked. The lid was stuck. The two porters got it open for him. The "corpse" toppled out and lay on its side. Joe leaped back with a howl.

"Murder!"

"Run for the cops!"

"Hiffle," said Freddy sadly, his ears leaking smoke.

The porters burst out of the room. Freddy glanced at the body, then bent over to read the note pasted inside the lid. He spat three pearls, gargled, and ran for the door, hiffing on his way.

The "corpse" climbed to its feet, dressed hurriedly, and washed its face. It hung a sign on the lid of the open trunk, then raced out of the room and headed for the freight elevator. The sign on the trunk said: OUT TO LUNCH.

The porters came back with a cop. The cop looked around, took the porters' names, and let them go. After a few minutes, another officer came in with Freddy.

"He was running down the alley when I caught . . ." He stopped talking and looked at the trunk, and the sign on the trunk.

Both cops looked solemnly at the Martian.

"Hiffle," Freddy said weakly.

"He never even giggled," Snyder whispered weakly and gulped another round of gin. "Not even a smile."

"He can't smile," I reminded him. "Martians can't . . ."

"Get out!" he told me savagely.

It was his kitchen we were sitting in, so I got up to go. He threw an ash tray at me. I went.

Snyder was due at the studio

by eight o'clock. At eight-fifteen, Grayber called his home. No one answered. At eight-thirty, Grayber called an aircab and flew out to Snyder's place. He was back at ten till nine, looking rather white.

"Not there. Doors all open—I went through the whole house. No Snyder."

We called half a dozen of the most likely places, but still no Snyder. By then it was five minutes before nine. The situation was beyond rescue. We got Mike Ferris to m.c. the show, and told the world that Martin Snyder had been stricken with appendicitis. The show that night was a wretched hodgepodge.

In the morning the client served notice of six weeks as required by the contract. And if Snyder missed another night's appearance, the client intended to sue for breach of contract.

We didn't see Snyder again for ten days, when Sue Obregon said she had spotted him falling into a Greeno Quarter dive. I went looking for him. It took four days to find him, but I hit pay on the night of his own show. It was too late to get him to the studio, and he was in no condition. He was sprawled in a booth toward the rear of a dingy tavern with his cheek on the table in a puddle of beer. He had at least a week's beard, and wore five pounds of dirt on his clothes. He was sleeping at the moment.

I went over and shook him. It took a while to get him awake.

"What the hell you want?" he muttered. "Who you anyway?"

"Look, Snyder, it's me. Snap out of it. You've got to straighten up."

"Got the wrong fellow," he said. "My name's not Snyder. Who in hell are you? Don't know you, never saw you. Freddy's my name. Frederick Bismarck Charlemagne. Nice name, eh? Picked it myself. Real name's Martian name. You can't pronounce. Sounds like sitting down on a piano keyboard. My real name, I mean. Just call me Freddy. I make 'em laugh."

"Yeah." I wondered if he had heard what we had cooked up to cover his absence on the show tonight. I glanced at my watch. Nine-twenty. I went over to the bar, glanced up at the Telescreen.

"Mind switching over to channel fifty-three?" I asked the bartender.

He nodded and switched channels. There stood Freddy, telling Snyder's jokes. The audience was howling with glee. They weren't laughing at the jokes. They were laughing at Freddy who obviously saw nothing at all amusing in what he was saying and spoke Snyder's lines with funereal solemnity—and even paused to make little clinical explanations of why each gag was supposed to be funny, as Snyder had explained to him.

A piercing scream came from the direction of the booths. I looked around. Snyder was on his feet and staring wild-eyed at the Telcset. He screamed again and ran for the door.

"Hey! You owe me for two drinks!" yelled the bartender.

"I'll get it," I told him and reached for my wallet.

Brakes screeched and tires howled on the pavement outside. We bolted for the door, expecting to find Snyder a flattened imprint on the concrete. But the comedian was not in sight. . . .

The day of the next show Grayber and I got a note from him. There was no return address on it. The note said: "Go home with Freddy after the show. Need witnesses. This time he'll really howl."

The audience was not so amused by Freddy that night. It was funny once, but no more. When we got to Freddy's place, there were no lights on, and no sound from inside. Freddy unlocked the door. Grayber went in first and found the light switch.

"Snyder?"

No answer.

"Turn off the lights again," I told him. "I thought I noticed a glow from the bedroom."

He snapped the switch. We stood there for awhile waiting for our eyes to adapt to the dark. Freddy's adapted first.

"Goofy dim light. Hiffle."

We headed for the bedroom and stopped, crowding the doorway. There was a candle burning at the foot of the bed. There was a body, or a facsimile of a body, stretched out on the bed. It was covered head to toe by a sheet. Freddy hiffled.

"Get up, Snyder. Twice is too much."

I turned on the light. Snyder—or what we assumed was Snyder—didn't stir. A box of GROOVER'S SUPER-ATOMIC RAT POISON—*Sure Death in Ten Seconds to Pests*—lay open on a small table beside the bed. There was a note under the box. Freddy went over to read it. He hiffled and handed it to me. The note said:

Dear Freddy,

The corpse in your bed is me.
Snyder.

Freddy's ears were leaking smoke. "Get up, Snyder," he shrilled. "Not funny a bit. Hiffle hiffle . . ."

The figure on the bed lay motionless. Freddy ripped the sheet back. It was Snyder, all right. He was as chalky as he had looked before, but this time there was no blood. He managed to look deader now, though. His face

was gray blue, and his lips were drawn back.

"Hiffle."

"Snyder, get up! It's no damn good!"

He didn't move. Freddy's ears jetted smoke. He grabbed Snyder by the shoulders and shook him angrily. Snyder's head didn't wobble the way it should have. Nor could he have held his breath that long.

Rigor mortis had already set in.

Freddy shook him harder. "Snyder, Snyder, wake up . . . hoo hoo! Hoo hoo hoo! Hooo hoo hooo hoo hoo. . ."

Grayber went to the bed and bent over Snyder's face. He sniffed, then glanced at me. "Rat poison," he said.

"Hoo hoo hoo hoo!" Freddy was chortling. "Hoo hoo hoo! Now I get it, Snyder. Now I get it! Hoo hoo hoo hoo . . ." He was alternately shaking the corpse and stamping his feet in wild hilarity.

Snyder had been right. He could make *anybody* laugh. We stood there with our hats in our hands, listening to Freddy's unrestrained gaiety. We held our hats over our hearts, and it seemed a touching thing to hear Freddy laugh.

Too bad Snyder couldn't have heard it.

NIGHT SKY OF VENUS

by

ERIK

*Ahead was the impenetrable, roiling yellow wall
of a Venus storm front. And Lora was dying.*

FENNEL

*Mike could think of one hope—something only a
spaceman could do. . . . Something abnormal . . .*

THE FIRST VENUSQUAKE LURCH broke Mike Hadley's aimless pacing and threw him toward the radio desk. He reached to catch himself, missed, felt a corner jab his ribs.

The fear was worse than the pain. His blood's clotting power was still dangerously low and his capillary walls, weakened and changed by radiation exposure, wouldn't stand much shock. He could hemorrhage, under his skin. Turn into a bruise, one big sloppy walking bruise. Die.

The refuge hut bucked and dipped nauseatingly in the viscid muck of the swamp.

"All right now," the girl said. He released his grip and his breath. Lora Sims would know. She was a Veenie.

Lora said, "It's a bad one."

They were all bad. Except when they got worse. I'll never cuss again, Mike thought disgustedly. For the rest of my life the dirtiest word I know will be

—Venus. Get the Venus out of this Venus place, you Veenie.

Which reminded him to look again at the Veenie. Looking at her would be a pleasure, if you didn't know. But he knew, and look at that! he thought in irritation, as she settled down with her notebooks. It was her assignment as organic chemist of the Group to devise ways of processing the filthy poisons out of the filthier plants of this double-filthy planet. And she couldn't wait, couldn't relax, even when she was interrupted between stations and had just made it with her engines spitting and gagging. A Veenie . . . conditioned that way, and her life was Venus Group and Venus Project and Venus Colony. Veenies were all monomaniacs.

What would you do, Veenie, if I told you it was all up, that there isn't going to be any more Venus Project? What happens to a monomaniac when there just aren't any more old shoes, or old

etchings, or whatever, any more? They transfer to something else. . . . Transference, for a *Veenie*?

Well, who gives a damn? You lose your mind. You lose your lousy planet. *I* lose the stars.

An area-charge began to concentrate in the storm, and against that set of Venusian peculiarities the hut was no insulation. Neural flows. It worked on Mike as an itching tingle that started in his skin and wormed inward. It got into his thoughts and emotions, into the very neurones and axones of his body. Localized sensations of hot and cold and wetness and pain and sunlight and sex and cutting and tweaking, all without any immediate cause.

He glanced at Lora. She was feeling the area-charge too. But her eyes were sparkling and her lips were curved in a half-smile. She didn't mind it. She *liked* it.

Lora left her notebooks and went to stand at the window.

Mike knew what was out there and didn't want to see it. Windstirred muck and the whipped-down wreckage of outrageous vegetation that in the humid heat would burst into new life when the wind had passed. Overhead, nothing but The Fence Around Venus—the Blanket, heavy at the bottom with CO₂, humid, dusty—an eternally falling slime. And up on top, raging combustion products from the volcanos, swirl-

ing, deadly, unkillable fungus-spores and molds. The whole thing writhing obscenely, twisting and straining in the planet's axial wobble, shot with cosmics and high-level radiation from a hot and nearby sun.

So instead he watched the girl. Lordy, he thought, what a picture she'd make! The streaky orange and purple glow of the storm outlined her with knife-edged brilliance. She'd peeled out of her swamp suit as soon as she'd come in, and was wearing the standard anti-chafing undergarments, skin-fitting shirt and pants. The faint lavender of the translucent material did something just right for her skin.

Between the times when the Hairbreadth Hadley part of him took over and wrecked any rational plans, he fancied himself as an artist, and as such he lay watching her and considering techniques. It would take some odd tricks with undercoatings and semi-transparent pigmcuts to catch that light on canvas . . .

The area charge let up on him a little. He slept, and—

He was back on the ship, before this had all happened. He was on the ship with Tommy, arguing with Tommy, knowing in the strange way common to so many spacemen what Tommy was thinking, how Tommy was planning to keep him from

grounding on Venus even if he had to lock him in the head—Tommy, who was quite content to give Venus back to the Indians.

But Venus is the key to the stars. Tommy couldn't see that—Venus as the prime training ground for extra-solar explorers; Venus as the richest source of starship fuels—why, the outer Blanket alone could charge the big grids through a de-ionizer in four transits in orbit.

So who needs the stars? Tommy shrugged it off.

It came down to that; and there Mike Hadley and Tommy parted company. Mike was hog-headed, bound and determined to skip ship and browse around among the Veenies in search of something — anything — that could persuade Earth to continue the Colony. Tommy was equally determined not to let him do it. "And besides, the Veenies don't want you, or anybody who isn't working like a three-headed cat in a creamery for the Project."

But Mike wouldn't listen—couldn't. Damn the pig-headed Veenies and their filthy mudball anyway; they were setting star-flight back a hundred years with their kind of controlled insanity. Normal humans couldn't stand Venus; conditioned humans—could. But Veenies couldn't think like *people*. And Earth didn't want to deal with them any longer.

While Tommy was landing the ship, Mike quietly slipped into a lead suit and dropped into the pile-pit. He stood there watching the telltale on his wrist climb through white, through orange, into the red, and when he figured he had a nice light dose—just enough to make it dangerous to his blood-vessels to take blast-off, but nothing the Veenie medics couldn't cure up in a couple of weeks—he grinned and said into his suit-mike, "Okay, Tommy, give us a lift out of here."

And Tommy didn't answer . . . and didn't answer . . . and didn't answer.

Mike stood in the pit, helpless during deceleration in the heavy suit, calling, calling. . . . Tommy, concentrating on the controls, thinking Mike was couched right behind him, had turned off the intercom.

And then he had . . . well, all spacemen know about it. He had *reached* Tommy. They'd fooled around with esper-chess and they'd played the old stunt of forcing the most disturbing dreams on a sleeping shipmate, and laughing like hell at the results, but that was kid-stuff compared with this ravening blast off—whatever-it-was—that Mike sent out in his need.

The rest was a haze—Tommy appearing white-faced, staring down into the pit . . . the in-

describable messiness of vomiting in free-fall . . . then a blackness with the knell of Tommy's voice (or was it another example of this *reaching?*) over and over . . . *crazy bastard . . . crazy bastard . . .* then a long blackness, and when he came out of it Tommy was gone, obeying the inexorable schedules of the planets, and Mike had won his point. He had succeeded in stranding himself on Venus where he'd have nothing to do but poke around looking for that one thing he couldn't even name, that might keep this crazy station going.

Venus twisted his nerves and he woke up with a hoarse scream. There were hands on his face, trying to . . . to—he beat them away.

"Are you all right?" asked the girl. She touched his forehead again. He lay glowering at her, pain receding, consciousness fighting its way lethargically up front. He became aware that she was naked. He shifted his gaze and saw her damp underclothes stirring against the air-recharger. "Is there anything I can do?"

"Leave me the hell alone," he growled.

"Very well," she said. Her feelings weren't hurt. The exchange had nothing to do with Venus, so it didn't touch her. She moved calmly back to the loafer-chair and sprawled out with her notes.

He watched her and slowly began to grind his teeth.

She was as unconcerned in her nakedness as if she were at home in the presence of a house-cat.

He didn't matter. He didn't belong. She hadn't the sensitivities, the intuitions, of a human being. The capacity for empathy, for sympathy was just not in Veenies—it had been left out along with laughter and ecstasy and the sense of wonder . . .

And what made it worse, she was so goddam beautiful.

She said, "We can leave soon now." All eager and obsessed to get on with the work.

Mike swore. She glanced out at the raging muck outside. "You take your time," she said kindly. "Stay here until you're sure you can handle it."

"Don't be silly," he growled, and, while every muscle-fiber in his body called him a liar, he added, "I'm as ready as you are. Let's get out of this rat-trap."

They dressed rapidly, checked air-filters and face-masks, and went out together. The black drizzle greeted them gladly, with a roar and a terrible thumping that spun him half around. He saw Lora's teeth flash behind her mask as she accepted the challenge, and then she was gone into the murk. He leapt after her, slid and fell wallowing in the mud while she vaulted lightly into her flyer. By the time he had reached

his, hers was gone, flung up and away into the storm.

He slumped into the seat and closed his greenhouse. He goosed the drivers and settled down to flying and feeling sorry for himself. After an hour he was hopelessly disoriented and had to call and get talked in. He got onto the apron at last and called to thank the tower and add, "Lora Sims check in?" He hadn't even known he was thinking of her.

"Sure. Checked in and took off again. Want to relay a message?"

"Just wondered," Mike said, feeling like a damn fool. He grunted out of the flyer and glanced at it without affection. What a hunk of bubble-gum to be bucketing around this planet in! Now on Earth, they worked like magic.

Which, of course, was one of the troubles. These compact, wingless craft, ingeniously powered from the planet's own magnetic field, with a magnetic transformer no bigger than a man's two fists and a power-plant smaller than his head, had been invented here on Venus. No airfoils, no fuel, no trouble except when the magnetic field itself started churning up, which just doesn't happen to any serious extent on Earth. So having invented the machine, the Veenies proceeded to pirate all sorts of expensive Earthside equipment to build a fleet of them. And in addition,

they never *told* anybody about the flyers. They didn't exactly hide them—un-conditioned spacemen usually huddled close to their ships and got out of there as soon as they could. And when at last someone did notice one of the flyers, the Veenies were perfectly willing to part with the blueprints.

"Why didn't you report this? This'll change the whole pattern of transportation on Earth!"

"Why didn't you ask?" said the Veenies. It never occurred to them to think of Earth, what Earth might need or like.

Mike limped into Assignment and checked in. "Anything else?"

"Hadley?" said the despatcher. "Not just now—oh yes. Dr. Brandstedt wants you to come in for a checkup."

He nodded and paused a minute to watch her. She was a slender little brunette except here and here, and she was already totally oblivious to him.

He sighed again and slogged tiredly off to Brandstedt's quarters. The doctor always made him mad. So did everything else on Venus, but he glumly enjoyed getting mad at the great originator of Venus Conditioning, the biggest wheel here—as near to a leader as the Veenies (who needed no leading) had. At least the doc had a little objectivity left. He had to have it, partly to keep his mind free for his work, which

covered a fantastically wide spectrum of physiology and psychology. A man could talk to Brandstedt for—oh—minutes at a time, and forget he was a Veenie.

Mike went in, kicked the door closed, and leaned wearily against it.

"Mikel!" said the doctor jovially. "How do you feel, boy?"

"Mostly," said Mike, "I don't. But when I do—oh, brother."

"Where've you been?"

"Mine Five, with timing gears for a jaw-crusher. Then over to Artemis Camp for some slime-mold. Got sugared in by a slush storm, complete with quakes and an area-charge and one of the more gorgeous of your zombies."

"How'd you take it?"

"What?" growled Mike, coming across the room and falling into a loafer. "The quakes threw the corner of a desk at my south-east ribs. The area charge was fun. Miss Lora Sims, whom I did not take, was not fun."

The doctor's bright eyes brightened a candlepower or two. "Lora Sims, hm? You like?"

"Did I say so?" Mike snapped.

"Well, in a way you did."

"Don't give me that esper glop, Doc," said Mike bluntly. "You don't know what I'm thinking. Veenies are strictly null in the psi department."

"A lot better off for it. What good did it ever do anyone anyhow?"

Mike thought vividly of the pile pit where he had gotten his dose, and of Tommy's white face showing up above him. But that was a story he couldn't tell the doctor. So he said nothing.

"Well, let's get to it," said the doctor, rising.

Mike rose too and shucked out of his clothes.

Just under an hour later he was back in them again and sprawled on the loafer. His body yelled for sleep and his joints were raising hell.

"You haven't been taking it any too easy," commented the doctor. "Why do you fly so much?"

"Something to do," said Mike, and shrugged. He wasn't about to admit that his first half-day out of the sick-bay had been the most humiliating stretch he had ever lived through. An idler on Venus was like a leper in the Fourteenth century.

"Well, it's appreciated."

"The hell it is!" Mike barked, feeling at last the kind of anger he almost enjoyed. "A crotchety haemophilic like me can work a twenty hour day eight days a week and all it does is raise him to zero! If he does any less he's a fester!"

"My," said the doctor mildly. "How many times a day do you fly off the handle like this? . . . Did Lora bother you?"

"Yes she did," Mike admitted. "And she made me mad. And I

got thumped around by the quake and I didn't like that either."

"You're going to have to take it easy," mused the doctor.

"You're driving at something."

"Well, yes. Mike, you might be fit for blast-off stresses when Tommy gets back, and you might not. If not, you might not last until the next time. Not on Venus. Unless—"

"Unless—" Mike said in unison with him, and then wagged his head. "Doc, I thought we made an agreement six weeks ago that I was to get no more recruiting speeches from you. We agreed that I was irresponsible, irrational, and unworthy to be a Veenie and we'd let it go at that."

"I'm afraid this isn't just a pep talk, Mike. It might be conditioning—or else. You see, Mike, you have a fine chance of surviving if you could only get clear of the emotional stresses and strains this place puts on you. You can't leave, because your blood-vessels say no. The alternative is to change yourself so that Venus can't hurt you."

"Go along with the Venus Project?" Mike began to laugh. "Doc, I'll just go on being irrational and unfit. And I'll outlast the Project. You remember I said that."

"You're a damn fool, Mike. You're worse. You're a suicide."

So are you. So's the Project, said Mike, but he didn't say it aloud.

"Mike, listen to reason. We could use you here. You could be happy. Why, I wouldn't be surprised if Lora Sims—"

"Don't go bribing me with that ambulating Florence flask! Quit the matchmaking, Cupid. Lora Sims has a very nice structural design—that I'll admit. And she's a whee of a chemist. But even on a temporary basis all she'd want would be to snuggle up to me and discuss 17-ketosteroids. No, Doc—I'm afraid I'd crawl over nine of her to get to Mother Machree."

"Well, you take it easy."

"I will. I will. I'll go sleep for a week and then just sit on the bank and watch you squirrels bury your nuts."

He shuffled out past the girl despatcher. He was concentrating so hard on holding himself together that her voice came through him as if filtered through four blankets, and he managed four steps past her before her words got into his head.

He whirled and got back to the desk in one jump. "What did you say?"

She looked at him calmly over the microphone she had been speaking into. "I'm reporting a flyer down, that's all."

"You said Lora Sims!" He hammered suddenly on the counter. "What are you going to do?"

"Requisition another flyer, if we can find the material. Get a summary of Lora Sims' work and

pro-rate it among qualified personnel. Find out if it requires additional training for—"

"What about Lora!" he yelled. "Aren't you going to search?"

"The area has been scanned twice." She indicated her board. "Now a storm front has closed down everything between here and Artemis Camp. There is nothing we can do for her."

He made an unspellable sound and pounded out at a dead run. He galloped past the small flyers and skidded into the side of a three-seater. He snatched the cabin door open. There was a Veenie inside. "Out, boy," Mike barked. "Unless you want to come along."

"Come along? You can't take this ship out."

"Lora Sims is down some place between here and Artemis!"

"All the more reason for not losing another flyer. We can't afford—"

"Get out," Mike said in a terrifying whisper, and with one hand on the Veenie's wrist, snatched him out and literally threw him away. He dove into the flyer and slammed the Go. The craft shuddered for a moment and then rammed him back into the cushions as it dove for the Blanket.

He turned on his 'scopes and the radio. The signal was full of grass. Through all the garbage on his speaker he heard his name being called.

". . . Dr. Brandstedt here.

Come back! There is nothing you can do! The Project can't—"

"Don't talk to me about the Project, Doc! I got a project!"

"Hadley, listen to me. We've had flyers down before. We've tried to rescue the people. We never have. Never, do you understand that? Just write her off. You can't do a thing. It's a waste. It's a waste." The doctor said the word as if it was the very peak of his vocabulary. "If you knew just where she was—well, maybe. But your radar is out. Your nav is out. Come back while you can—you are in no physical—"

Out with a snap as Mike Hadley cut the switch.

He flew the machine. The doc was right about the radar, and the nav. Bright whirling worms, meaningless. He shut them off too.

He flew the machine with his eyes, with his pants-seat.

Hairbreadth Hadley, here we go again. Good sense, goodbye.

He looked ahead. A wall of oatmeal, boiling down on him.

He looked down. All the vegetation, bowing down in one direction, slimy cilia on the inside of a great gut.

Suddenly he *knew* what he was up against—he knew what would happen if he flew head on into that roiling yellow wall. He knew how right, how very right the Veenies were to attempt no rescues, risk no flyers.

He hauled the flyer around in a turn so tight the whole machine crackled from end to end. And when he was headed away from her, something within him, born of his ravaged body and his tortured mind, the failure to save the Venus Colony and therefore the starship program—all came out in a great silent bleat of yearning: *Lora!*

"She's alive," he said aloud, in wonderment. "She's alive . . ."

He throttled back, and then the storm front took him.

It took him with surprising gentleness. Had he kept up his insane dash full-speed into it, it would have squashed him flat and flung him down. Now it simply surrounded him.

With the greatest act of will he had ever exercised, he let go the controls and flew hands off. The flyer hung seemingly motionless for apparently forever, then suddenly plunged backwards and began to spin . . .

Lora!

And again the response—weak and wordless and almost not there at all. Not enough. Not enough . . . she must *send*, not just *be* there.

Abruptly there was clear air under him—in Venus terms, clear. Not oatmeal, at any rate. He fought the flyer to something like flight position. He was in a storm, a bad storm, but at least he could see a little, fly a little.

He let his hands do the flying, and closed his eyes. *Lora!*

Something was happening, or had happened to him. He had had the odd sensation of sending before, but never like this.

Try something, Mike—try!

He reached into memory, selected a picture, built it to vividness and merged himself into it.

Autumn, a slight nip in the air, the world young and exciting and alive. Stars and a huge orange moon silhouetting the trees on a distant hill. Top down, engine of the car making faint irregular cooling sounds. And—

Himself in the car, eager, before he ever went into space. Feel of his body. Feel of his position, turned sideways in the seat. Not alone. Shape of the girl. Her perfume. The softness of her hair. Sound of her breathing.

Leaning toward her. Her face turning toward him. Her lips parting slightly against his in the kiss. His hand finding its way into the warmth beneath her sweater, touching the responsive welcome of her breasts.

His feelings. His desires. His sensations.

He gathered the impressions, then made the odd mental movement he had felt in his early blind callings: *transmit!* Drive them at Lora's mind *as if they were hers*, building into her a pseudo-memory.

He felt a confusion of identity,

a stirring up of words and concepts she wouldn't, couldn't acknowledge to herself. *Herself feeling that way about another girl!* A horrified *My God what am I thinking!*

He felt his mind prickle and writhe with the effort of holding the transmission. Then he switched it off and lay back, gasping.

Lora stirred, came up halfway to consciousness. She was in pain and her pain came through to him. Grimly he held on.

He got, with the pain, a more-than-hunch of direction and distance, and he saw that his hands had done what was needed.

The girl was back in resignation, apathy, hopelessness, approaching surrender to the wind-whipped cold, the nostril-stopping mud. He sank back to try again.

Pure emotion this time. Man brutally clubbing little dog, crimson lust for murder knotting his muscles. Three overstuffed stupid maliciously unhappy old bags and their even more distasteful husbands gabbling the race prejudice and Aryan superiority line, and a howling urge to stuff their foul mouths with greasy rags until they choked in agony. Other hates, dozens of them, all the hates in his memory.

He packaged them in his mind, stripping away the incidents and leaving only emotion—and pushed them out.

Lora reacted. He could *feel* her mental defenses click in. Then she kicked back with indignation, anger to bring her out of apathetic resignation to death and up into rage and life.

His hands found the right thing to do with the controls again. He roused himself and looked out and down. Nothing, and nothing, and nothing but frenzied mud and supplicating branches.

He was only closer. He was not near.

Pseudo-memories not enough; pure emotion not enough. So—involve her completely. All of her, mind, body—but not in agreement. He had seen her body (with his eye and with that of the sometime artist) and he'd read books on abnormal psychology. He'd known men who . . . people who . . . then, in the newspapers, that fellow, you know the one . . .

Select . . . gather . . . synthesize . . . *transmit*.

Her reaction rocked him into dizziness, and it was sheer agony to hold on while he got it all out.

. . . (grunt) again! (grunt) again! (grunt and a scream of agony) that's my honey, that's my dear. BITE-BITE. (Moan and the laughter of insanity.) Hands here and here and here and they won't stop, die my honey, die my dear. BITE. See? See? Picture of this, picture of that, picture the other, my honey, oh my dear.

(The laugh.) (The whisper: Ah-h-h . . .)

More of it, and more until she fights back, panics, tightens, she's going to faint and escape and be gone so *hold it* . . .

Timidly she queries, Oh God is it over?

Mike Hadley stirred in the bucket seat, aware of some exterior sensation that he knew he must identify; but he did not know how.

I know! he told himself in the slow stupidity of weariness. *Let go all that sewage—cut it out now. This other thing's important.*

Slowly he opened his eyes, slowly he turned and looked out.

There was a green glow around the flyer, the green glow emitted by the little transformer when it was near ground, or on it. Yes, that was it; he was on it.

He came alive with a rush and shouldered the door open. And there was her little solo flyer, and there was she, under it, a leg; and there were eyes mute and muddy and full of what would be hate when she recovered her strength. But no matter; she was here, she was alive, and he had found her.

He put one hand—only one hand—under the broken flyer where it lay on its side, pinning her leg, and he pulled, so hard the machine righted and fell away on the other side. He stood looking at his gloved hand in astonish-

ment, then bent and picked her up. She fainted immediately.

He stood holding her and looked up at the sky. His heart was full of wordless pressures. Something touched his cheek, prickly, then warm, then wet, then tickly-dry; and there was nothing there. Something urged his elbow to straighten, and he would not let it. (It was easy.) His stomach was full, was empty, was full of warm oil.

And suddenly he laughed, looking around him, turning, looking around again, with the flying mud streaming off his mask and the unconscious girl in his arms. It was the area discharge prodding and teasing him—but with a profound subjective difference. Before, in the refuge hut and other times, there had been the random spasmodic muscle twitches, just for example. *That*, he had said, *is the area discharge, a Venusian atmospheric effect.* And knowing that, he had, all the same, regarded his twitching arm with horror and depression. But now, he said *it's the area discharge*; and the result of his realizing that was precisely what Alice experienced in Wonderland, when she was bedevilled and beleaguered and in peril of having her head chopped off, and she suddenly rose up and said, "Why, you're nothing but a pack of cards!" and they were! So prod, Venus; tickle, tantalize, press,

chill, excite, stab, numb me; it's only Venus, and I need not twitch.

And he turned again in the blowing black, and looked down at the sweet burden in his arms, and marvelled. Minutes ago he had been barely able to lift a hand; yet here he stood bracing himself firmly against the wind, and easily holding an adult human. The muscle fibers of his arms were for the first time in his life cooperating with each other and with him; he could feel the rhythmic unmoving shift as fiber after fiber took the burden, used its energy, smoothly passed the effort to a neighbor, and rested. He could, if he wished, stand here and hold this girl till the weather was fine, which on Venus is an awesome interval.

He laughed cheerfully at Venus, and the girl stirred.

He set her in the three-seater and slid behind the controls, and angled up into the storm. It wasn't a storm, though, but a fencing match; a game, not a duel, and it delighted him, as sensitive wrists anticipated the buffetings of wind and water, gave and yielded and baffled the opponent.

Something's happened to me, he thought. All parts of me belong to myself, and no cell within me, brain or body, battles another. Some strange product of the many factors of the past months—radiation, and medication for it, anger

and hurt and internal bleeding, fear and love.

Love. He looked at Lora and, in this new way he had found, probed gently.

She despised him.

He was sorry about that. But loving now, that was something. That was fine.

My God, he thought happily, I'm conditioned, that's what I am. To Venus, yes. But to love too, and to use my entire self under my self's total control; conditioned for anything anywhere. What will the doctor say?

The doctor was surprised, but he was not amazed. "I knew it Mike; I think I've always known it. The important thing in conditioning is that the qualities, good and bad, are all *there* in the subject. All I do with my big fat complicated treatment is bring out those qualities that the Project needs and suppress everything else. You, now, you've stumbled across a way to bring everything you have up to optimum—everything. And I wish I knew how you did it."

"Oh, it was easy," said Mike. "First you go out of your head, then you get sick, then you fall in love, then you get scared." And as he said it the new clean cells, the uncluttered synapses of his optimum mind, came up with the answer—came up with a future for Venus Project, and for the

starships. "Doc," he said quietly, "you've done all those things but one. You've gone out of your head, planning to make Venus self-sustaining, so you and your Veenies and their Veenie children can live undisturbed and work on Venus . . . monomaniacs . . . and you've fallen in love, too, with this beautiful stinking planet. But you haven't been scared, Doc, not really scared. You will be now."

The doctor seemed to have shrunk by a third, and had eyes a third larger.

Mike said, "You're right on top of it—almost enough food, almost a way to smelt metals in this crazy atmosphere, almost a lot of things. But not quite. You need a few more Earth shiploads. You're helpless as an unborn babe without them."

"So hear this, Doc: and it's going to hurt. The unborn babe's cord is cut. Earth's shutting you down." As he spoke he gathered his mind and drove it with all his will into the doctor's.

. . . so that the doctor knew it was all true, and he knew why Earth was doing it, and he knew a great fear, mother-bear fear for his precious Project and its beloved people, its dedicated Veenies.

. . . and then Mike made him see what it was like to want the stars. No words, no details, nothing about Venus Project or Veenies or anything else but that

heady hunger for the immensities.

In a strangely symbolic gesture the doctor slowly raised his eyes upward, and Mike could clearly feel the cracking, the falling away of his self-administered conditioning and the seed of mania at its core. The doctor's mind leapt with astonished awe and greeting to all the people, all the worlds, all the stars so nearly forgotten.

He smiled.

After a time Mike said softly, "So now Venus Project will go on, you see? Because Star-Man just got born here."

The doctor looked at him, and a deep understanding passed between them. "And that's all it takes? Some fear, and then that—that being *inside*?" . . .

"I guess that's it, Doc."

". . . you think I can do . . ." He looked down at his hands, steadier and stronger hands than they were thirty years before ". . . do this for everyone here?"

"You know you can."

"Yes, I can," the doctor whispered. Mike left him looking at his hands and laughing. The big wheel of the Veenies—laughing.

He painted her as he'd seen her in the refuge hut, dressed in a clinging lavender plastic undersuit. And finally, finally, he captured the look of exhilaration and *reaching* that had been on her face, captured it because he un-

derstood it now, made of it a symbol of all reachings to everywhere.

He had taken her out of the hut and had placed her before the main viewport of a spaceship. And to conform to this he had drawn her under free-fall conditions, feet barely touching the deck, not resting firmly on it. He had altered the plays and tensions of her muscles. Without the drag of gravity her breasts were fuller and higher.

He finished it, which was unusual, and he knew the very instant, the very stroke it was finished, which was more so. The day after he finished it he was standing looking at it so raptly that he heard nothing until she gasped, just behind his shoulder.

He whirled, and suddenly they fell into each other's minds. It was a wordless thing, utterly indescribable. It left them weak and breathless, clinging to one another as they slowly came back into themselves . . . yet not quite, for never again would either be altogether whole, or quite alone.

"Why did you shut me out?"

he said when he could speak.

"I was ashamed," she whispered.

"Oh, no!"

"You were . . . there . . . before. You made me . . . remember things I must have buried deep for shame, things I didn't know I knew until you made me remember."

"They weren't memories, Lora. I made them up and put them there, to make you angry, make you fight. Live."

"You—"

"I should be ashamed."

She put her hand on his mouth as if she couldn't quite believe it unless she touched it. She said, "Shall I tell you why I let you in after all?" She turned him to look at the painting. "You were looking at it as if it was . . . only beauty. Mike, I didn't think you saw any beauty in me; now do you see?"

He kissed her very quietly. She trembled.

"What is it?"

"Mike," she whispered, and pointed at the picture, "Mike . . . paint her pregnant, will you . . . Mike?"

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COLD VICTORY

by POUL ANDERSON

Three men rode a barrel of compressed air through space

toward the massed fleet of Earth,

Relative velocity: a thousand kilometers per hour.

Chance of survival: minimum . . .

IT WAS THE OLD ARGUMENT, Historical Necessity versus the Man of Destiny. When I heard them talking, three together, my heart twisted within me and I knew that once more I must lay down the burden of which I can never be rid.

This was in the Battle Rock House, which is a quiet tavern on the edge of Syrtis Town. I come there whenever I am on Mars. It is friendly and unpretentious: shabby comfortable loungers scattered about under the massive sandwood rafters, honest liquor and competent chess and the talk of one's peers.

As I entered, a final shaft of thin hard sunlight stabbed in through the window, dazzling me, and then night fell like a thunderclap over the ochrous land and the fluoros snapped on. I got a mug of porter and strolled across to the table about which the three people sat.

The stiff little bald man was

obviously from the college; he wore his academics even here, but Martians are like that. "No, no," he was saying. "These movements are too great for any one man to change them appreciably. Humanism, for example, was not the political engine of Carnarvon—rather, he was the puppet of Humanism, and danced as the blind brainless puppeteer made him."

"I'm not so sure," answered the man in gray: undress uniform of the Order of Planetary Engineers. "If he and his cohorts had been less doctrinaire, the government of Earth might still be Humanist."

"But being born of a time of trouble, Humanism was inevitably fanatical," said the professor.

The big, kilted Venusian woman shifted impatiently. She was packing a gun and her helmet was on the floor beside her. Lucifer Clan, I saw from the tartar. "If there are folk around at a crisis time with enough force, they'll shape the way things turn out,"

she declared. "Otherwise things will drift."

I rolled up a lounge and set my mug on the table. Conversational kibitzing is accepted in the Battle Rock. "Pardon me, gentles," I said. "Maybe I can contribute."

"By all means, Captain," said the Martian, his eyes flickering over my Solar Guard uniform and insignia. "Permit me: I am Professor Freylinghausen—Engineer Soekarno—Freelady Nielsen-Singh."

"Captain Crane." I lifted my mug in a formal toast. "Mars, Luna, Venus, and Earth in my case . . . highly representative, are we not? Between us, we should be able to reach a conclusion."

I got out my pipe and began stuffing it. "There's a case from recent history in which I had a part myself. Offhand, at least, it seems a perfect example of sheer accident determining the whole future of the human race. It makes me think we must be more the pawns of chance than of law."

"I'll have to fill you in on some background." I lit my pipe and took a comforting drag. I needed comfort just then. It was not to settle an argument that I was telling this, but to re-open an old hurt which would never let itself be forgotten. "This happened during the final attack on the Humanists—"

"A perfect case of inevitability, sir," interrupted Freylinghausen. "Psychotechnic government had failed to solve the problems of Earth's adjustment to living on a high technological level. Conditions worsened until all too many people were ready to try desperation measures. The Humanist Revolution was the desperation measure which succeeded in being tried. A typical reaction movement, offering a return to a less intellectualized existence: the Savior with the Time Machine, as Toynbee once phrased it. So naturally its leader, Carnarvon, got to be dictator of the planet."

"But with equal force was it true that Earth could no longer *afford* to cut back her technology. Too many people, too few resources. The Humanists failed to keep their promises; their attempts led only to famine, social disruption, breakdown. Losing popular support, they had to become increasingly arbitrary."

"At last the oppression of Earth became so brutal that the democratic governments of Mars and Venus brought pressure to bear. But the Humanists had gone too far to back down. Their only possible reaction was to pull Earth-Luna out of the Solar Union."

"We could not see that happen, sir. Without a Union council to arbitrate between planets and a Solar Guard to enforce its decisions—there will be war until

man is extinct. Earth could not be allowed to secede. Therefore Mars and Venus aided the anti-Humanist cabal which wanted to restore liberty and Union membership to the mother planet. Therefore, too, a space fleet was raised to support an uprising.

"Don't you see? Every step was an unavoidable consequence, by the logic of survival, of all which had gone before."

"All right so far, Professor," I nodded. "But the success of the anti-Humanists and the Mars-Venus intervention was by no means guaranteed. Mars and Venus were still frontiers, thinly populated. They didn't have the military potential of Earth.

"The cabal was well-organized. Its well-timed mutinies swept Earth's newly created pro-Humanist ground and air forces before it. The countryside, the oceans, even the cities were soon cleared of Humanist troops.

"But Dictator Carnarvon and the men still loyal to him were holed up in a score of fortresses. Oh, it would be easy enough to dig them out or blast them out—except that the navy of Sovereign Earth, organized from seized units of the Solar Guard, had also remained loyal to Humanism. Its cinc, Admiral K'ung, had acted promptly when the revolt began, jailing all personnel he wasn't sure of—or shooting them.

"So there the pro-Union revo-

lutionaries were, in possession of Earth but with a good 500 enemy warships orbiting above them. K'ung's strategy was simple. He broadcast that unless the rebels surrendered inside one week—or if meanwhile they made any attempt on Carnarvon's remaining strongholds—he'd start bombarding with nuclear weapons.

"Under such a threat, the general population was no longer backing the rebel cause. They clamored for surrender.

"Meanwhile, as you all know, the Unionist fleet under Dushanovitch-Alvarez had rendezvoused off Luna: as mixed a bunch of Martians, Venusians, and freedom-minded Earthmen as history ever saw. They were much inferior; it was impossible for them to charge in on Admiral K'ung and give battle with any hope of winning . . . but Dushanovitch-Alvarez had a plan. It depended on luring the Humanist fleet out to engage him.

"Only, K'ung wasn't having any. It was a costly nuisance, the Unionists sneaking in, firing and retreating, blowing up ship after ship of the Humanist forces. But K'ung would not accept the challenge until the rebels on the ground had capitulated; he was negotiating with them now, and it looked very much as if they would give in.

"So there it was, the entire outcome of the war—the whole his-

tory of man, for if you will pardon my saying so, gentles, Earth is still the key planet—everything hanging on this one officer, Grand Admiral K'ung Li-Po, a grim man who had given his oath and had a damnably good grasp of the military facts of life."

I took a long draught from my mug and began the story, using the third-person form which is customary on Mars.

The speedster blasted at four gees till she was a bare 500 kilometers from the closest enemy vessels; her radar screens were jittering with their nearness and in the thunder of abused hearts her crew sat waiting for the hawk-blow of a homing missile. Then she was at the calculated point, she spat her cargo out the main lock and leaped away still more furiously. In moments the thin glare of her jets was lost among crowding stars.

The cargo was three space-suited men, linked to a giant air tank and burdened with a variety of tools. The orbit into which they had been flung was aligned with that of the Humanist fleet, so that relative velocity was low.

In cosmic terms, that is. It still amounted to nearly a thousand kilometers per hour.

Lieutenant Robert Crane pulled himself along the light cable that bound him, up to the tank. His hands groped in the

pitchy gloom of shadowside—then all at once rotation had brought him into the moonlight and he could see. He found the rungs and went hand over hand along the curve of the barrel, centrifugal force streaming his body outward. Awkwardly, he got one foot into a stirrup-like arrangement and scrambled around until he was in the "saddle" with both boots firmly locked; then he unclipped the line from his waist.

The stars turned about him in a cold majestic wheel. Earth was an enormous grayness in the sky, a half-ring of blinding light from the hidden sun along one side.

Twisting a head made giddy by the spinning, he saw the other two mounted behind him. García was in the middle—you could always tell a Venusian, he painted his clan markings on his suit—and the Martian Wolf at the end. "Okay," he said, incongruously aware that the throat mike pinched his Adam's apple, "let's stop this merry-go-round."

His hands moved across a simple control panel. A tangentially mounted nozzle was opened, emitting an invisible stream of air. The stars slowed their lunatic dance, steadied.

"Any radar reading?" García's voice was tinny in the earphones.

"A moment, if you please, till I have it set up." Wolf extended a telescoping mast, switched on the portable 'scope, and began

sweeping the sky. "Nearest indication . . . um . . . one o'clock, five degrees low, 422 kilometers distant." García worked an astrogator's slide rule.

The base line was not the tank, but its velocity, which could be assumed straight-line for so short a distance. Actually, the weird horse had its nose pointed a full 30 degrees off the direction of movement. "High" and "low," in weightlessness, were simply determined by the plane bisecting the tank, with the men's heads arbitrarily designated as "aimed up."

The airbarrel had jets aligned in three planes, as well as the rotation-controlling tangential nozzles. With Wolf and García to correct him, Crane blended vectors until they were on a course which would nearly intercept the ship. Gas was released from the forward jet at a rate calculated to match velocity.

There was nothing but the gauges to tell Crane that he was braking. Carefully dehydrated air emerges quite invisibly, and its ionization is negligible; there was no converter to radiate, and all equipment was painted a dead non-reflecting black.

Soundless and invisible—too small and fast for a chance eye to see in the uncertain moonlight, for a chance radar beam to register as anything worth buzzing an alarm about. Not enough infrared

for detection, not enough mass, no trail of ions—the machinists on the *Thor* had wrought well, the astrogators had figured as closely as men and computers are able. But in the end it was only a tank of compressed air, a bomb, a few tools, and three men frightened and lonely.

"How long will it take us to get there?" asked Crane. His throat was dry and he swallowed hard.

"About 45 minutes to that ship we're zeroed in on," García told him. "After that, *¿quien sabe?* We'll have to locate the *Monitor*."

"Be most economical with the air, if you please," said Wolf. "We also have to get back."

"Tell me more," snorted Crane.

"If this works," remarked García, "we'll have added a new weapon to the System's arsenals. That's why I volunteered—if Antonio García of Hesperus gets his name in the history books, my whole clan will contribute to give me the biggest ranch on Venus."

They were an anachronism, thought Crane, a resurrection from old days when war was a wilder business. The psychotechs had not picked a team for compatibility, nor welded them into an unbreakable brotherhood—they had merely grabbed the first three willing to try an untested scheme. There wasn't time for anything else. In another 40 hours, the rebel, pro-Union armies on Earth would either have sur-

rendered or the bombardment would begin.

"Why are you lads here?" went on the Venusian. "We might as well get acquainted."

"I took an oath," said Wolf. There was nothing priggish about it; Martians thought that way.

"What of you, Crane?"

"I—it looked like fun," said the Earthman lamely. "And it might end this damned war."

He lied and he knew it, but how do you explain? Do you admit it was an escape from your shipmates' eyes?

Not that his joining the Unionists had shamed him; everyone aboard the *Marduk* had done so, except for a couple of CPO's who were now under guard in Aphrodite. The cruiser had been on patrol off Venus when word of Earth's secession had flashed; her captain had declared for the Union, and the crew cheered him for it.

For two years, while Dushanovitch-Alvarez, half idealist and half buccaneer, was assembling the Unionist fleet, intelligence reports trickled in from Earth. Just before the Unionists accelerated for rendezvous, a detailed list of all the new captains appointed by K'ung had been received. And the skipper of the *Huitzilopochtli* was named Benjamin Crane.

Ben . . . what did you do, when your brother was on the enemy side? Dushanovitch-Alvarez

had let the System know that a bombardment of Earth would be regarded as genocide and all officers partaking in it would be punished under Union law. Lieutenant Robert Crane of the *Marduk* had protested: this was not a normal police operation, it was war, and executing men who merely obeyed the government they had pledged to uphold was opening the gates to a darker barbarism than the fighting itself. The Unionist force was short-handed, and gave Lieutenant Crane no more than a public reproof for insubordination; but his messmates had tended to grow silent when he entered the wardroom.

If the superdreadnaught *Monitor* could be destroyed, and K'ung with it, Earth might not be bombarded; then if the Unionists won, Ben would go free, or he would die cleanly in battle—reason enough to ride this thing into the Humanist fleet!

Silence was cold in their helmets.

"I've been thinking," said García. "Suppose we do carry this off, but they decide to blast Earth anyway before dealing with our boats. What then?"

"Then they blast Earth," said Wolf. "Though most likely they won't have to. Last I heard, the threat alone was making folk rise against our friends on the ground there." Moonlight shimmered

along his arm as he pointed at the darkened planet-shield before them. "So the Humanists will be back in power, and even if we chop up their navy, we won't win unless we do some bombarding of our own."

"¡Madre de Dios!" García crossed himself, a barely visible gesture in the unreal flood of undiffused light. "I'll mutiny before I give my name to such a thing."

"And I," said Wolf shortly. "And most of us, I think."

It was not that the Union fleet was crewed by saints, thought Crane. Most of its personnel had signed on for booty—the System knew how much treasure was locked in the vaults of Earth's dictators. But the horror of nuclear war had been too deeply graven for anyone but a fanatic at the point of desperation to think of using it.

Even in K'ung's command, there must be talk of revolt. Since his ultimatum, deserters in lifeboats had brought Dushanovitch-Alvarez a mountain of precise information. But the Humanists had had ten years in which to build a hard cadre of hard young officers, to keep the men obedient.

Strange to know that Ben was with them—*why?*

I haven't seen you in more than two years now, Ben—nor my own wife and children, but tonight it is you who dwell in me, and I have not felt such pain for many

years. Not since that time we were boys together, and you were sick one day, and I went alone down the steep bluffs above the Mississippi. There I found the old man denned up under the trees, a tramp, one of many millions for whom there was no place in this new world of shining machines—but he was not embittered, he drew his citizen's allowance and tramped the planet and he had stories to tell me which our world of bright hard metal had forgotten. He told me about Br'er Rabbit and the briar patch, never had I heard such a story, it was the first time I knew the rich dark humor of the earth itself. And you got well, Ben, and I took you down to his camp, but he was gone and you never heard the story of Br'er Rabbit. On that day, Ben, I was as close to weeping as I am this night of murder.

The vessel on which they had zeroed came into plain view, a long black shark swimming against the Milky Way. They passed within two kilometers of her. Wolf was busy now, flicking his radar around the sky, telling off ships. It was mostly seat-of-the-pants piloting, low relative velocities and small distances, edging into the mass of Earth's fleet. The Monitor was in the inner ring; a deserter had given them the approximate orbit.

"You're pretty good at this, boy," said García.

"I rode a scooter in the asteroids for a couple of years," answered Crane. "Patrol and rescue duty."

Slowly over the minutes, the *Monitor* grew before him, a giant spheroid never meant to land on a planet. He could see gun turrets scrawled black across remote star-clouds. There was more reason for destroying her than basic strategy—luring the Humanists out to do battle. It would be the annihilation of a symbol: the *Monitor*, alone among all ships that rode the sky, was designed with no other purpose than killing.

Slow, now, easy, gauge the speeds by eye, remember how much inertia you've got . . . edge up, brake, throw out a magnetic anchor and grapple fast. Crane turned a small winch, the cable tautened and he bumped against the hull.

There was no talking. They had work to do, and their short-range radio might have been detected. García unshipped the bomb. Crane held it while the Venusian scrambled from the saddle and got a firm boot-grip on the dreadnaught. The bomb didn't have a large mass. Crane handed it over, and García slapped it onto the hull, gripped by a magnetic plate. Stooping, he wound a spring and jerked a small lever. Then, with the spaceman's finicking care, he returned to the saddle.

In twenty minutes, the clock-

work was to set off the bomb. It was a small one, plutonium fission, and most of its energy would be wasted on vacuum. Enough would remain to smash the *Monitor* into a hundred white-hot fragments.

Crane worked the air-jets, forcing himself to be calm and deliberate. The barrel swung about to point at Luna, and he opened the rear throttle wide. Acceleration tugged at him, he braced his feet in the stirrups and hung on with both hands. Behind them, the *Monitor* receded.

When they were a good 15 kilometers away, he asked for a course. His voice felt remote, as if it came from outside his prickling skin; most of him wondered just how many men were aboard the dreadnaught and how many wives and children they had to weep for them. Wolf squinted through a sextant and gave his readings to García. Corrections made, they rode toward the point of rendezvous: a point so tricky to compute, in this Solar System where the planets were never still, that they would doubtless never come within a hundred kilometers of the speedster that was to pick them up. But they had a hand-cranked radio which would broadcast a strong enough signal for the boat to get a fix on them.

How many minutes had they been going? Ten . . . Crane looked at the clock in the control

panel. Yes, ten. Another five or so, at this acceleration, ought to see them beyond the outermost orbit of the Humanist ships—

He did not hear the explosion. There was a swift and terrible glare inside his helmet, enough light reflected off the inner surface for his eyes to swim in white-hot darkness. He clung blind to his seat, nerves and muscles tensed against the hammerblow that never came. And then the darkness parted raggedly, and he turned his head back toward Earth. A wan nimbus of incandescent gas hung there, and a few tattered stars glowed blue as they fled from it.

Wolf's voice whispered in his ears: "She's gone already. The bomb went off ahead of schedule. Something in the clockwork—"

"But she's gone!" García let out a rattling whoop. "No more flagship. We got her, lads, we got the stinking can!"

Not far away, there was a shadow visible only where it blocked off the stars. A ship . . . light cruiser—"Cram on the air!" said Wolf roughly. "Let's get the devil out of here."

"I can't." Crane snarled it, his brain still dizzy, wanting only to rest and forget all war. "We've only got so much pressure left, and none to spare for maneuvering if we get off course."

"All right—" They lapsed into silence. That which had been the

Monitor, gas and shrapnel, dissipated. The enemy cruiser fell behind them, and Luna filled their eyes with barren radiance.

They were not aware of pursuit until the squad was almost on them. There were a dozen men in combat armor, driven by individual jet-units and carrying rifles. They overhauled the tank and edged in—less gracefully than fish, for there was no friction to kill forward velocity, but they moved in.

After the first harsh leap of his heart, Crane felt cold and numb. None of his party bore arms: they themselves had been the weapon, and now it was discharged. In a mechanical fashion, he tuned his headset to the standard band.

"Rebels ahoy!" It was a voice strained close to breaking, an American voice . . . for a moment such a wave of homesickness for the green dales of Wisconsin went over Crane that he could not move or realize he was about to be captured. "Stop that thing and come with us!"

In an animal reflex, Crane opened the rear throttles full. The barrel jumped ahead, almost ripping him from the saddle. There was a flaring of ions behind as the enemy followed. Their units were beam-powered from the ship's nuclear engines, and they had plenty of reaction mass in their tanks. It was only a moment

before they were alongside again.

Arms closed around Crane, dragging him from his seat. As the universe tilted about his head, he saw Wolf likewise caught. García sprang to meet an Earthman, hit him and bounced away but got his rifle. A score of bullets spat. Suddenly the Venusian's armor blew white clouds of freezing water vapor and he drifted dead.

Wolf wrestled in vacuum and tore one hand free. Crane heard him croak over the radio: "They'll find out—" Another frosty geyser erupted; Wolf had opened his own airtubes.

There was a man on either side of Crane, pinioning his arms—he could not have suicided even if he chose to. The rest flitted in, guns ready. He relaxed, too weary and dazed to fight, and let them face him around and kill forward speed, then accelerate toward the cruiser.

The airlock was opening for him before he had his voice back. "What ship is this?" he asked, not caring much, only filling in an emptiness.

"Huitzilopochtli. Get in there with you."

Crane floated weightless in the wardroom, his left ankle manacled to a stanchion. They had removed his armor, leaving only the thick gray coverall which was the underpadding, and given him a stimpill. A young officer guarded him, sidearm holstered—no rea-

son to fear a fettered captive. The officer did not speak, but awe and horror lay on his lips.

The pill had revived Crane, his body felt supple and he sensed every detail of the room with an unnatural clarity. But his heart had a thick beat and his mouth felt cottony. . . .

Captain Benjamin Crane of the Space Navy, Federation of Earth and the Free Cities of Luna, drifted in through a ghostly quiet. It was a small shock to see him again . . . when had the last time been, three years ago? They had gone up to their father's house in Wisconsin. The old man was dead and the house had stood empty a long time. But it had been a fine pheasant shoot, on a certain cool and smoky-clear fall morning. Robert Crane remembered how the first dead leaves had crackled underfoot, and how the bird dog stiffened into a point which was all flowing line and deep curves, and the thin high wedge of wild geese, southward bound.

That was the first thing he thought of, and then he thought that Ben had put on a good deal of weight and looked much older, and then he recalled that he himself had changed toward gauntness and must seem to have more than the two-year edge on Ben he really did.

The captain stiffened as he came through the air. He grabbed

a handhold barely in time, and stopped his flight ungracefully. After that there was another quietness. There was little to see on Ben's heavy face, unless you knew him as well as his own brother did.

He spoke finally, a whisper: "I never looked for this."

Crane of the *Marduk* tried to smile. "What are the mathematical odds against it?" he wondered. "That I, of all people, should be on this mission, and that your ship of all Earth's fleet should have captured me. How did you detect us?"

"That bomb . . . you touched it off too soon. The initial glare brought us all to the ports, and the gas-glow afterward, added to the moonlight, was enough to reveal a peculiar object. We got a radar on it and I sent men out."

"Accident," said Robert Crane. "It wasn't supposed to detonate till we were well away."

"I knew you were on . . . the other side," said Ben with slowness. "If it hadn't been for the *Marduk's* special Venus patrol, you would probably have been right here when the . . . the trouble began, and you'd have had to remain loyal."

"Like you, Ben?"

The young officer of Earth floated "upright," at attention, but his eyes were not still. Ben nodded at him. "Mr. Nicholson, this prisoner happens to be my brother."

There was no change in the correct face.

Ben sighed. "I suppose you know what you did, Lieutenant Crane."

"Yes," said Robert. "We blew up your flagship."

"It was a brilliant operation," said Ben dully. "I've had a verbal report on your . . . vessel. I imagine you planted an atomic bomb on the *Monitor's* hull. If we knew just where your fleet is and how it's arrayed, as you seem to know all about us, I'd like to try the same thing on you."

Robert floated, waiting. There was a thickening in his throat. He felt sweat forming under his arms and along his ribs, soaking into the coverall. He could smell his own stink.

"But I wonder why that one man of yours suicided," went on Ben. He frowned, abstractedly, and Robert knew he would not willingly let the riddle go till he had solved it. "Perhaps your mission was more than just striking a hard blow at us. Perhaps he didn't want us to know its real purpose."

Ben, you're no fool. You were always a suspicious son-of-a-gun, always probing, never quite believing what you were told. I know you, Ben.

What had Wolf's religion been? Crane didn't know. He hoped it wasn't one which promised hellfire to all suicides. Wolf

had died to protect a secret which the drugs of Earth's psychotechs—nothing so crude as torture—would have dissolved out of him.

If they had not been captured . . . the natural reaction would have been for Earth's fleet to rush forth seeking revenge before the Unionists attacked them. They did not know, they must not know, that Dushanovitch-Alvarez lacked the ships to win an open battle except on his own ground and under his own terms; that the Humanist fleet need only remain where it was, renew the threat of bombardment, carry it out if necessary, and the Union men could do nothing to interfere.

"Sir—"

Ben's head turned, and Robert saw with an odd little sadness that there were gray streaks at the temples. What was his age—31? *My kid brother is growing old already.*

"Yes, Mr. Nicholson?"

The officer cleared his throat. "Sir, shouldn't the prisoner be interrogated in the regular way?"

"Oh, yes, Intelligence will be happy to pump him," said Ben. "Though I suspect this show will be over before they've gotten much information of value. Vice Admiral Hokusai of the *Krishna* has succeeded to command. Get on the radio, Mr. Nicholson, and report what has happened. In the meantime, I'll question the prisoner myself . . . privately."

"Yes, sir." The officer saluted and went out. There was compassion in his eyes.

Ben closed the door behind him. Then he turned around and floated, crossing his legs, one hand on a stanchion and the other rubbing his forehead. His brother had known he would do exactly that. *But how well can he read me?*

"Well, Bob." Ben's tone was a gentle one.

Robert Crane shifted, feeling the link about his ankle. "How are Mary and the kids?" he asked.

"Oh . . . quite well, thank you. I'm afraid I can't tell you much about your own family. Last I heard, they were living in Manitowoc Unit, but in all the confusion since—" Ben looked away. "They were never bothered by our police, though. I have some little influence."

"Thanks," said Robert. Then bitterness lashed out: "Yours are safe in Luna City. Mine will get the fallout when you bombard, or they'll starve in the famine to follow."

The captain's mouth wrenched. "Don't say that!" After a moment: "Do you think I like the idea of shooting at Earth? If the rebels really give a curse in hell about the people their hearts bleed for so loudly, they'll surrender first. We're offering terms; they'll be allowed to go to Mars or Venus."

"I'm afraid you misjudge us,

Ben," said Robert. "Do you know why I'm here? It wasn't just a matter of being on the *Marduk* when she elected to stay with the Union. I believe in what the rebels are trying to do."

"Believe in those pirates out there?" Ben's finger stabbed at the wall, as if to pierce it and show the stars and the hostile ships swimming between.

"Oh, sure, they've been promised the treasure vaults. We had to raise men and ships somehow. What good was all that money doing, locked away by Carnarvon and his gang?" Robert shrugged. "Look, I was born and raised in America. We were always a free people. From the moment the Humanists seized power, I had to start watching what I said, who I associated with, what tapes I got from the library. My kids were growing up into perfect little parrots. It was too much. When the purges began, when the police fired on crowds rioting because they were starving—and they were starving because this quasi-religious creed cannot accept the realities and organize things rationally—I was only waiting for my chance. . . . Ben, be honest. Wouldn't you have signed on with us if you'd been on the *Marduk*?"

The face before him was gray. "Don't ask me that! No!"

"I can tell you exactly why not, Ben." Robert folded his arms and

would not let his brother's eyes go. "I know you well enough. We're different in one respect. To you, no principle can be as important as your wife and children—and they're hostages for your good behavior. Oh, yes, K'ung's psychotechs evaluated you very carefully. Probably half their captains are held by just such chains."

Ben laughed, a loud bleak noise above the steady murmur of the ventilators. "Have it your way. And don't forget that your family is alive, too, because I stayed with the government. I'm not going to change, either. A government, even the most arbitrary one, can perhaps be altered in time. But the dead never come back to life."

He leaned forward, suddenly shuddering. "Bob, I don't want you sent Earthside for interrogation. They'll not only drug you, they'll set about changing your whole viewpoint. Surgery, shock, a rebuilt personality—you won't be the same man when they've finished.

"I can wangle something else. I have enough pull, especially now in all the confusion after your raid, to keep you here. When the war is settled, I'll arrange for your escape. There's going to be so much hullabaloo on Earth that nobody will notice. But you'll have to help me, in turn.

"What was the real purpose of your raid? What plans does your high command have?"

For a time which seemed to become very long, Robert Crane waited. He was being asked to betray his side voluntarily; the alternative was to do it anyway, after the psychmen got through with him. Ben had no authority to make the decision—it would mean court-martial later, and punishment visited on his family as well, unless he could justify it by claiming quicker results than the long-drawn process of narco-synthesis.

Robert Crane wet his lips. "How do you know I'll tell the truth?" he asked.

Ben looked up again, crinkling his eyes. "We had a formula once," he said. "Remember? 'Cross my heart and hope to die, spit in my eye if I tell a lie.' I don't think either of us ever lied when we took that oath."

"Ben, the whole war hangs on this, maybe. Do you seriously think I'd keep my word for a kid's chant if it could decide the war?"

"Oh, no." There was a flickering smile in the captain's eyes. "There's going to be a meeting of all the skippers, if I know Hokusai. He'll want the opinions of us all as to what we should do next. Having heard them, he'll make his own decision. I'll only be one voice among a lot of others."

"But if I can speak with whatever information you've given me—do you understand? The council will meet long before you

could be sent Earthside and quizzed. I need your knowledge *now*. I'll listen to whatever you have to say. I may or may not believe you . . . but it's the only way I can save you, and myself, and everything else I care about."

He waited then, patiently as the circling ships. They must have come around the planet by now, thought Robert Crane. The sun would be drowning many stars, and Earth would be daylit if you looked out.

A captains' council . . . it sounded awkward and slow. But they all, nearly all, had kindred on Earth. None of them wished to explode radioactive death across the world they loved. K'ung's will had been like steel, but now they would—subconsciously, and all the more powerfully for that—be looking for any way out of the frightful necessity. A respected officer, giving good logical reasons for postponing the bombardment, would be listened to eagerly.

Robert Crane shivered. It was a heartless load to put on any one man. The dice of all future history . . . he could load the dice, because he knew Ben as any man knows a dear brother, but maybe his hand would slip as he loaded them.

"Well?" It was a grating in the captain's throat.

Robert drew a long breath. "All right," he said.

"Yes?" A high, cracked note; Ben must be near breaking too.

"I'm not in command, you realize." Robert's words were blurred with haste. "I can't tell for sure what— But I do know we've got fewer ships. A lot fewer."

"I suspected that—"

"We have some plan—I haven't been told just what—it depends on making you leave this orbit and come out and fight us where we are. If you stay here, there's not a damn thing we can do. This raid of mine . . . we'd hoped that with your admiral dead, you'd join battle out toward Luna."

Robert Crane hung in the air, twisting in its currents, the breath gasping in and out of him. Ben looked dim, across the room, as if his eyes were failing.

"Is that the truth, Bob?" The question seemed to come from light-years away.

"Yes. Yes. I can't let you go and get killed and— Cross my heart and hope to die, spit in my eye if I tell a lie!"

I set down my mug, empty, and signalled for another. The bartender glided across the floor with it and I drank thirstily, remembering how my throat had felt mummified long ago on the *Huitzilopochtli*.

"Very well, sir." Freylinghausen's testy voice broke a stillness. "What happened?"

"You ought to know that, Professor," I replied. "It's in the history tapes. The Humanist fleet decided to go out at once and dispose of its inferior opponent. Their idea—correct enough, I suppose—was that a space victory would be so demoralizing that the rebels on the ground would capitulate immediately. It would have destroyed the last hope of reinforcements, you see."

"And the Union fleet won," said Nielsen-Singh. "They chopped the Humanist navy into fishbait. I know—my father was there. We bought a dozen new reclamation units with his share of the loot, afterward."

"Naval history is out of my line, Captain Crane," said the Engineer, Soekarno. "Just how did Dushanovitch-Alvarez win?"

"Oh . . . it was a combination of things. Chiefly, he disposed his ships and gave them such velocities that the enemy, following the usual principles of tactics, moved at high accelerations to close in. And at a point where they would have built up a good big speed, he had a lot of stuff planted, rocks and ball bearings and scrap iron . . . an artificial meteor swarm, moving in an opposed orbit. After that had done its work, the two forces were of very nearly equal strength, and it became a battle of standard weapons. Which Dushanovitch-Alvarez knew how to use!

A more brilliant naval mind hasn't existed since Lord Nelson."

"Yes, yes," said Freylinghausen impatiently. "But what has all this to do with the subject under discussion?"

"Don't you see, Professor? It was chance all along the line—chance which was skillfully exploited when it arose, to be sure, but nevertheless a set of unpredictable accidents. The *Monitor* blew up ten minutes ahead of schedule; as a result, the commando that did it was captured. Normally, this would have meant that the whole plan would have been given away. I can't emphasize too strongly that the Humanists would have won if they'd only stayed where they were."

I tossed off a long gulp of porter, knocked the dottle from my pipe, and began refilling it. My hands weren't quite steady. "But chance entered here, too, making Robert Crane's brother the man to capture him. And Robert knew how to manipulate Ben. At the captains' council, it was the *Huitzilopochtli's* skipper who spoke most strongly in favor of going out to do battle. His arguments, especially when everyone knew they were based on information obtained from a prisoner, convinced the others."

"But you just said—" Nielsen-Singh looked confused.

"Yes, I did." I smiled at her, but my thoughts were all in the

past. "But it wasn't till years later that Ben heard the story of Br'er Rabbit and the briar patch; he came across it in his brother's boyhood diary. Robert Crane told the truth, swore to it by a boyhood oath—but his brother could not believe he'd yield so easily. Robert was almost begging him to stay with K'ung's plan. Ben was sure it was an outright lie . . . that Dushanovitch-Alvarez must actually be planning to attack the navy in its orbit and could not possibly survive a battle in open space. So that, of course, was what he argued for."

"It took nerve, though," said Nielsen-Singh. "Knowing what the *Huitzilopochtli* would have to face—knowing you'd be aboard—"

"She was a wreck by the time the battle was over," I said. "Not many who were in her survived."

After a moment, Soekarno nodded thoughtfully. "I see your point, Captain. The accident of the bomb's going off too soon almost wrecked the Union plan. The accident of that brotherhood saved it. A thread of coincidences—yes, I think you've proved your case."

"I am afraid not, gentles." Freylinghausen darted birdlike eyes around the table. "You misunderstood me. I was not speaking of minor ripples in the mainstream of history—certainly those are ruled by chance. But the broad current moves quite inexorably,

I assure you. *Vide*: Earth and Luna are back in the Union under a more or less democratic government, but no solution has yet been found to the problems which brought forth the Humanists. They will come again; under one name or another, they will return. The war was only a ripple, after all."

"Maybe." I spoke with inurbane curtness, not liking the thought. "We'll have to see."

"If nothing else," said Neilsen-Singh, "you people bought for Earth a few more decades of freedom. They can't take that away from you."

I looked at her with sudden respect. It was true. Men died and civilizations died, but before they died they *lived*. It was not altogether futile.

But I could not remain here. I

had told the story, as I must always tell it, and now I needed aloneness.

"Excuse me." I finished my drink and stood up. "I have an appointment . . . just dropped in . . . vry happy to have met you, gentles."

Soekarno rose with the others and bowed formally. "I trust we shall have the pleasure of your company again, Captain Robert Crane."

"Robert—? Oh." I stopped. I had told what I must in third person, but it had seemed so obvious to me—"I'm sorry. Robert Crane was killed in the battle. I am Captain Benjamin Crane, at your service, gentles."

I bowed to them all and went out the door. The night was lonesome in the streets and across the desert.





BIRD OF PREY

by

MARION ZIMMER
BRADLEY

IT WOULD BE AN HOUR before I could board the starship. Straight ahead, an open gateway led to the spaceport, and the white skyscraper which was the Headquarters of the Terran Empire on Wolf; behind me, Phi Coronis was dipping down over the roofs of the Kharsa—the Old Town—which lay calm in the bloody sunset, but alive with the sounds and the smells of human, nonhuman and half-human life. The pungent reek of incense from an open street-shrine made my nostrils twitch, and a hulked form inside, not human, cast me a surly green glance as I turned aside into the cafe at the spaceport gates.

The bird looked like a toy.

"Press this point," Evarin

said to me, with green,

nonhuman malice in his eyes,

"and if you are within a

certain distance of Race

Cargill, it will find and

kill him . . ."

One thing Evarin didn't

know—I was Race Cargill.

It wasn't crowded inside. A pair of furred chaks lounged beneath the mirrors at the far end. One or two spaceport personnel, in storm gear, were drinking coffee at the counter, and a trio of Dry-towners, rangy lean men in colorful shirtcloaks, stood at a wall-shelf, eating Terran food with aloof dignity. In my neat business clothes I felt more conspicuous than the furred and long-tailed chaks; an Earthman, a civilian. I ordered, and by unconscious habit, carried my food to a wall-shelf near the Dry-towners, the only native humans on Wolf.

They were tall as Earthmen, weathered by the fierce sun of their parched cities of dusty salt



stone—the Dry Towns which lie in the bleached bottoms of Wolf's vanished oceans. Their dialect fell soft and familiar on my ears. One, without altering his expression or his easy tone, had begun to make elaborate comments on my entrance, my appearance, my ancestry and probable personal habits, all defined in the colorfully obscene dialect of the Dry Towns.

I leaned over and remarked, in the man's own dialect, that at some future and unspecified time I would appreciate an opportunity to return their compliments.

By custom they should have apologized, and laughed at a jest decently reversed on themselves. Then we would have bought each other a drink, and that would have been that. But it didn't happen that way. Not this time.

Instead, to my dismay, one of them fumbled inside the clasp of his shirtcloak; I edged backward, and found my own hand racing upward, seeking a skean I hadn't carried in six years. It looked like a rough-house.

The chaks in the corner moaned and chattered. Then I became aware that the three Dry-towners were gazing, not at me, but at something, or someone, just behind me. Their skeans fumbled back into the clasps of their cloaks, and they surged back a pace or two.

Then they broke ranks, turned and ran. They *ran*—blundering

into stools as they went, leaving a havoc of upset benches and broken crockery in their wake. I let my breath go, turned, and saw the girl.

She was slight, with waving hair like spun black glass, circled with a tracery of stars. A black glass belt imprisoned her waist, like clasped hands, and her robe, stark white, bore an ugly sprawl of embroidery across the breasts—the hideous Toad God, Nebran. Her face was all human, all woman, but the crimson eyes held a hint of alien mischief.

Then she stepped backward, and with one swift movement she was outside in the dark street. A smudge of incense from the street-shrine blurred the air; there was a little stirring, like the rising of heat waves in the salt desert at noon. Then the shrine of Nebran was empty, and nowhere in the street was there a sign of the girl; she simply was not there.

I turned toward the spaceport, slowly, walking through a dragging reluctance, trying to file the girl away in memory as just another riddle of Wolf that I'd never solve.

I'd never solve another riddle on Wolf. I'd never see it again. When the starship lifted at dawn, I'd be on it, outbound from Phi Coronis—the red sun of Wolf.

I strode toward the Terran H.Q.

No matter what the color of the sun, once you step inside an

H.Q. building, you are on Terra. The Traffic Division was efficiency made insolent, in glass and chrome and polished steel. I squinted, readjusting my eyes to the cold yellowness of the light, and watched myself stride forward in a dozen mirrors; a tall man with a scarred face, bleached by years spent under a red sun. Even after six years, my neat civilian clothes didn't fit quite right, and, with unconscious habit, I still walked with the lean stoop of the Dry-towners I had impersonated. The clerk, a rabbitty little man, raised his head in civil inquiry.

"My name's Cargill," I told him. "Have you a pass for me?"

He stared. A free pass aboard a starship is rare except for professional spacemen, which I obviously wasn't. "Let me check my records," he hedged, and punched scanning buttons on the mirror top of the desk. "Brill, Cameron—ah, yes, Cargill—are you *Race* Cargill of the Secret Service, sir? *The Race* Cargill? Why, I thought—I mean,—everybody took it for granted that you were—"

"You thought I'd been killed a long time ago because my name never turned up in the news? Yes, I'm *Race* Cargill. I've been working upstairs on Floor 38 for six years, holding down a desk any clerk could handle."

He gawped. "You, the man who went to Charin in disguise and routed out The Liess? And you've

been working upstairs all these years? It's—hard to believe, sir!"

My mouth twitched. It had been hard for me to believe while I was doing it. "The pass?"

"Right away, sir." There was respect in his voice now, despite those six years. Six years of slow death since Rakhal Sensar had left me a marked man, my scarred face making me a target for all my old enemies, and ruining my career as a Secret Service man.

Rakhal Sensar—my fists knotted with the old, impotent hate. And yet, it had been Rakhal Sensar who had first led me into the secret byways of Wolf, teaching me a dozen alien languages, coaching me in the walk and step of a Dry-towner, perfecting a disguise which had become deep second nature to me. Rakhal was a Dry-towner from Shainsa, and he had worked in the Terran Secret Service, my partner since we were boys. Even now I was not sure why he had erupted, one day, into the violence that ended our friendship. Then he had simply disappeared, leaving me a marked man, my usefulness to the Secret Service ended . . . a bitter man tied to a desk . . . and a lonely man—Juli had gone with him.

With a small whirring noise, a chip of plastic emerged from a slot on the desk. I pocketed the pass, and thanked the clerk.

I went down the skyscraper steps, and across the vast expanse

of the spaceport, avoiding or ignoring the last-minute bustle of cargo loading, process crews, curious spectators. The starship loomed over me, huge and hateful.

A steward took me to a cabin, then strapped me into the bunk, tugging at the acceleration belts until my whole body ached. A long needle went into my arm—the narcotic that would keep me safely drowsy during takeoff. Doors clanged, men moved and talked in the corridors with a vague excitement. All I knew about Theta Centaurus, my destination, was that it had a red sun, and the Legate on Megaera could use a trained Secret Service man. And *not* pin him down at a desk. My mind wandered and it was a pair of crimson eyes, and hair like spun black glass, that tumbled down with me, down into the bottomless pit of sleep . . .

. . . someone was shaking me.

"Ah, come on, Cargill. Wake up, fella."

My eyes throbbed, and when I got them open I saw two men in the black leather of spaceforce guards, mingled with some vague memory of a dream. We were still inside gravity. I came all the way awake with a rush, swinging my legs out of the bunk, flinging aside the belts somebody had unfastened.

"What the devil—Is something wrong with my pass?"

He shook his head. "Magnus-

son's orders. Ask him about it. Can you walk?"

I could, although my feet were a little shaky on the ladders.

I knew it made no sense to ask what was going on. They wouldn't know. I asked anyway. "Are they holding the ship for me?"

"Not that one," he answered.

My head was clearing fast, and the walk speeded up the process. As the elevator swooped up to Floor 38, my anger mounted. Magnusson had been sympathetic when I resigned; he'd arranged the transfer and the pass himself. What right did he have to grab me off an outbound starship at the last minute? I barged into his office without knocking.

"What's this all about, chief?"

Magnusson was at his desk, a big bull of a man who always looked as if he'd slept in his rumpled uniform. He said, not looking up, "Sorry, Cargill, but there was just time to get you off the ship—no time to explain."

There was somebody in the chair in front of his desk; a woman, sitting very straight, her back to me. But when she heard my voice, she twisted around, and I stared, rubbing my eyes. Then she cried out, "*Race, Race!* Don't you *know* me?"

I took one dazed step forward. Then she had flown across the space between us, her thin arms tangling around my neck, and I caught her up.

"Juli!"

"Oh, Race, I thought I'd die when Mac told me you were leaving tonight, it was the only thing that kept me going, the thought of seeing you," she sobbed and laughed at once. I held my sister at arm's length, looking down at her. I saw the six years that divided us, all of them, printed plain on her face. Juli had been a pretty child; six years had fined her features into beauty, but there was tension in the set of her shoulders, and the gray eyes had looked into horrors.

I said, "What's wrong, Juli? Where's Rakhal?"

I felt her shiver, a deep thing that I could feel right up through my own arms.

"I don't know. He's gone. And—oh, Race, he's taken Rindy with him!"

"Who's Rindy?"

She didn't move.

"My daughter, Race. Our little girl."

Magnusson's voice sounded low and harsh. "Well, Cargill? Should I have let you go?"

"Don't be a damned fool!"

"Juli, tell Race what you told me—just so he'll know you didn't come for yourself."

I knew that, already. Juli was proud, and she *had* always been able to live with her own mistakes. This wouldn't be any simple complaint of an abused wife.

She said, "You made your big

mistake, Mac, when you turned Rakhal out of the Service. He was one of the best men you had."

"Matter of policy. I never knew how his mind worked. Do *you*, Juli? Even now? That final episode—Juli, have you taken a good look at your brother's face?"

Juli raised her eyes, and I saw her wince. I knew just how she felt; for almost three years I'd kept my mirror covered. Then she said, almost inaudibly, "Rakhal's face is—is just as bad."

"That's some satisfaction," I said.

Mac looked baffled. "Even now I don't know what it was all about."

"And you never will," I said for the dozenth time. "Nobody could understand it, unless he'd lived in the Dry Towns. Let's not talk about that. *You* talk, Juli. What brought you here? And what about the kid?"

"At first Rakhal worked as a trader in Shainsa," Juli began. I wasn't surprised. The Dry Towns were the core of Terran trade on Wolf. "Rakhal didn't like what the Empire was doing. But he tried to keep out of it. There were times—they'd come to him and ask for information, information he could have given them, but he never told them anything—"

Mac grunted, "Yeah, he's an angel. Go ahead."

Juli didn't, not immediately; instead, she asked, "Is it true what

he told me—that the Empire has a standing offer of a reward for a working model of a matter-transmitter?”

“That offer’s been standing for five hundred years, Terran reckoning. Don’t tell me he was going to invent one!”

“I don’t think so, no. But he heard rumors—he knew *about* one. He said he was going to try to find it—for money and Shainsa. He started coming in at odd times—wouldn’t talk to me about it. He was queer about Rindy. Funny thing. Crazy. He’d brought her some kind of nonhuman toy from one of the inland towns, Charin, I think. It was a weird thing, scared me. He’d talk to her about it and Rindy would gabble all kinds of nonsense about little men and birds and a toymaker—it *changed* him, it—”

Juli swallowed hard, twisting her thin fingers in her lap. “A weird thing—I was afraid of it, and we had a terrible fight. He threw it out and Rindy woke up and shrieked, she screamed for hours and hours. Then she dug it up out of a trashpile, she broke all her fingernails but she kept on digging for it, we never knew where or why, and Rakhal was like a crazy man—” abruptly Juli checked herself, and visibly caught at vanishing self-control.

Magnusson broke in, very gently. “Juli, tell Race about the riots in Charin.”

“In Charin—oh. I think he led the rioting; he came back with a knife cut in his thigh. I asked him if he was mixed up in the anti-Terran movements, and when he wouldn’t answer—that was when I threatened to leave him, and he said if I came—here—I’d never see Rindy again. The next day he was gone—”

Suddenly the hysteria Juli had been forcing back, broke free and she rocked back and forth in her chair, torn and shaken with great strangling sobs. “He—took—Rindy! Oh, Race, he’s crazy, crazy, I think he hates Rindy, he took—he smashed her toys, Race, he took every toy she had and broke them one by one, smashed them into powder, every toy she had—”

“Juli. Juli please—” Magnusson pleaded. I looked at him, shaken. “If we’re dealing with a maniac—”

“Mac, let me handle this. Juli. Shall I find Rakhal for you?”

A hope was born in her ravaged face, and died there, while I looked. “He’d have you killed. Or kill you.”

“He’d try, you mean,” I amended. I stooped and lifted Juli, not gently, my hands gripping at her shoulders in a sort of rage.

“And I won’t kill him—do you hear? He may wish I had, when I get through with him—*hear me, Juli?* I’ll beat the living daylights out of him, but I’ll settle it with him like an Earthman.”

Magnusson stepped toward me and pried my crushing hands off her shoulders. He said, "Okay, Cargill. So we're all crazy. I'll be crazy too—try it your way."

A month later, I found myself near the end of a long trail.

I hadn't seen an Earthman or a Dry-towner in five days. Charin was mostly a chak town; not many humans lived there, and it was the core and center of the resistance movement. I'd found that out before I'd been there an hour.

I crouched along the shadow of a wall, looking toward the gypsy glare of fires, hot and reeking at the far end of the Street of the Six Shepherds. My skin itched from the dirty shirtcloak I hadn't changed in days—shabbiness is wise in nonhuman parts, and Dry-towners from the salt lands think too highly of water to spend much of it in washing, anyway.

It had been a long and difficult trail. But I'd been lucky. And if my luck held, Rakhal would be somewhere in the crowd around those fires.

A dirty, dust-laden wind was blowing up along the street, heavy with the reek of incense from a street-shrine. I took a few steps toward the firelight, then stopped, hearing running feet.

Somewhere, a girl screamed.

Seconds later, I saw her; a child, thin and barefoot, a tangle of dark hair flying loose as she

darted and twisted to elude the lumbering fellow at her heels. His outstretched paw jerked cruelly at one slim wrist. The girl sobbed and wrenched herself free and threw herself straight on me, wrapping herself around my neck with the violence of a stormwind. Her hair got in my mouth, and her small hands gripped at my back like a cat's flexed claws. "Oh, help me," she sobbed, "don't let him, don't—" And even in that broken cry, I took it in; the brat did not speak the jargon of the slum, but the pure, archaic Shain-sa dialect.

What I did then was just as automatic as if it had been Juli; I pulled the kid's fists loose, shoved her behind me, and scowled at the pig-eyed fellow who lurched toward us. "Make yourself scarce," I advised.

The man reeled; I smelled sour wine and the rankness of his rags as he thrust one grimy paw at the girl. I thrust myself between them and put my hand on the skean quickly.

"*Earthman!*" The man spit out the word like filth.

"*Earthman!*" Someone took up the howl; there was a stir, a rustle, all along the street that had seemed empty, and from nowhere, it seemed, the space in front of me was crowded with shadowy forms, human and—otherwise.

"Grab him, Spilkar! Run him outa Charin!"

"Earthman!"

I felt the muscles across my belly knotting into a hard band of ice. I didn't believe I'd given myself away as an Earthman—the bully was using the old Wolf tactic of stirring up a riot in a hurry—but just the same I looked quickly round, hunting a path of escape.

"Put your skean in his guts, Spilkar!"

"*Hai-ai! Earthman! Hai-ai!*"

It was that last sound that made me panic, the shrill yelping *Hai-ai* of the Ya-men. Through the sultry glare of the fires, I could see the plumed and taloned figures, leaping and rustling; the crowd melted open.

"*Hai-ai! Hai-ai!*"

I whirled, snatching the girl up, and high-tailed it back the way I'd come, only faster. I heard the yelping shrieks of the Ya-men behind me, and the rustle of their stiff plumes; I dived headlong around the corner, ducked into an alley, and set the girl on her feet.

"Run, kid!"

"No, no! This way!" she urged in a hasty whisper, and her small fingers closed like a steel trap around my wrist; she jerked hard, and I found myself plunging forward into the shelter of a street-shrine.

"Here—" she panted, "stand in—close to me, on the stone—" I drew back, startled.

"Oh, don't stop to argue," she

whimpered. "Come *here!* Quick!"

"*Hai-ai! Earthman! There he is—*"

The girl's arms flung round me again; I felt her slight, hard body pressing on mine, and she literally hauled me toward the center of the shrine.

The world tilted. The street disappeared in a cone of spinning lights, stars plummeted crazily, and I plunged down—locked in the girl's arms—spun—dropped head-over-heels through reeling lights and shadows that wheeled around us. The yelping of the Ya-men whispered away in unimaginable distances, and for a second I felt the swift unmerciful black-out of a powerdive, with blood breaking from my nostrils and filling my mouth. . . .

Light flared in my eyes. I was standing square on my feet in a little street-shrine—but the street was gone. Coils of incense still smudged the air, the God squatted, toadlike, in his recess; the girl was still hanging limp, locked between my clenched arms. As the floor straightened under my feet, I staggered forward, thrown off balance by the sudden return of the girl's weight, and grabbed, blindly, for support.

"Give her to me," said a voice at my ear, and the girl's light sagging body was lifted from my arms. A strong hand grasped my elbow; I found a chair beneath

my knees, and sank gratefully into it.

"The transmission isn't smooth between such distant terminals," the voice remarked, "I see that Miellyn has fainted again. A weakling, the girl, but useful."

I spat blood, trying to get the room in focus. For I was inside a room; windowless, but with a transparent skylight, through which pink daylight streamed in thin long splinters. Daylight—and it had been midnight in Charin! I'd come halfway around the planet in a few seconds!

From somewhere, the room was filled with a sound of hammering; tiny, bell-like hammering, a fairy's anvil. I looked up and saw a man—a man?—watching me.

On Wolf you see all kinds of human, nonhuman and half-human life. I consider myself an expert on all three. But I had never seen anyone who so closely resembled the ordinary human—and so obviously wasn't. He, or it, was tall and lean, humanoid, but oddly muscled, a vague suggestion of something less than human in the lean hunch of his body. Manlike, he wore tight-fitting trunks, and a shirt of green fur that revealed bulging biceps where they shouldn't be, and angular planes where there should have been swelling muscles. The shoulders were high and hunched, the neck unpleasantly sinuous, and the face, only a little narrower than human, was

handsomely arrogant, with a kind of wary, alert mischief that was the least human thing about him.

He bent, tilted the girl's inert body on to a divan of some sort, and turned his back on her, lifting his hand in an impatient gesture.

All the little tinkling hammers stopped as if their switch had been turned out.

"Now," said the nonhuman, "we can talk."

Like the waif, he spoke the archaic Shainsa, with its lilting, sing-song rise and fall. I asked in the same language, "What happened? Who are you? And where am I?"

The nonhuman crossed his hands. "Do not blame Miellyn. She acted under orders. It was imperative to bring you here, and we had reason to believe you might ignore an ordinary summons. You were clever at evading our surveillance—for a while. But there would not have been two Drytowners in Charin tonight. You *are* Rakhal Sensor?"

Rakhal Sensor!

Shaken, I pulled a rag from my pocket and wiped the blood from my mouth. As far as I knew, there was no resemblance between Rakhal and myself—but it occurred to me, for the first time, that any casual description would fit either of us. Humans, tall and lean and without distinctive coloring, with the Dry-towner's walk and speech,

and the same scars across face and mouth—and I'd been hanging around in Rakhal's old haunts. The mistake was natural; and natural or not, I wasn't going to deny it.

"We knew," the nonhuman continued, "that if you remained where you were, the Earthman who has been trailing you—Cargill—would have made his arrest. We knew about your quarrel with Cargill—among other things—but we did not consider it necessary that you should fall into his hands."

I was puzzled. "I still don't understand. Exactly where am I?"

"This is the Master-shrine of Nebran."

Nebran! Knowing what Rakhal would have done, I hastily made the quick good-luck gesture, gabbling a few archaic words.

Like every Earthman on Wolf, I'd seen blanked impassive faces at mention of the Toad God. Rumor made his spies omniscient, his priesthood virtually omnipotent, his powers formidable. I had believed about a tenth of what I heard, but even that was considerable. Now I was in his shrine, and the device which had brought me here, without a doubt, was a working model of a matter-transmitter.

A matter-transmitter—a working model—Rakhal was after it.

"And who," I asked slowly, "are you, Lord?"

The green-clad creature hunched his shoulders in a ceremonious bow. "My name is Evarin. Humble servant of Nebran and yourself, honorable sir," he added, but there was no humility in his manner. "I am called the Toymaker."

Evarin. That was another name given weight by rumor; a breath of gossip in a thieves market, a scrawled name on a torn scrap of paper—a blank folder in Terran Intelligence. A Toymaker . . .

The girl on the divan sat up, passing slim hands over her dish-eveled hair. "My poor feet," she mourned, "they are black and blue with the cobbles, and my hair is filled with sand and tangles! Toymaker, I will do no more of your errands! What way was this to send me to entice a man?"

She stamped one small bare foot, and I saw that she was not nearly as young as she had looked in the street; although immature by Terran standards, she had a fair figure for a Dry-town girl. Her rags fell around her slim legs in graceful folds, her hair was spun black glass, and I suddenly saw what the confusion in the filthy street had kept me from seeing before.

It was the girl of the spaceport café—the girl with the Toad-God embroidered on the breast of her robes, who had sent the Dry-towners to running madly, insane with terror.

I saw that Evarin was watching me, and turned idly away. Evarin said, with a kind of rueful impatience, "You know you enjoyed yourself, Miellyn. Run along and make yourself beautiful again."

She danced out of the room.

The Toymaker motioned to me. "This way," he directed, and led me through a different door. The offstage hammering I had heard, tiny bell-tones like a fairy xylophone, began again as the door opened, and we passed into a workroom which made me remember nursery tales from a half-forgotten childhood on Terra. For the workers were tiny, gnarled—*trolls!* They were chaks—chaks from the Polar mountains, furred and half-human, with witchlike faces, but transformed, dwarfed. Tiny hammers pattered on miniature anvils, in a tinkling, jingling chorus of musical clinks and taps. Beady eyes focussed, like lenses, over winking jewels and gimcracks. Busy elves. Makers of—

Toys!

Evarin jerked his hunched shoulders with an imperative gesture; I recalled myself, following him through the fairy workroom, casting lingering glances at the worktables. A withered lepra-chaun set eyes into the head of a minikin hound; delicate fingers worked precious metals into invisible filigree for the collarpiece of a dainty dancing doll with living emerald eyes; metallic feathers

were thrust in clockwork precision into the wings of a skeleton bird no larger than a fingernail. The nose of the hound wobbled sensitively, the bird's wings quivered, the eyes of the little dancer swivelled to follow me as I passed.

Toys?

"Come along." Evarin rapped, and a door slid shut behind us. The clinks and taps grew faint, fainter. But never ceased.

"Now you know, Rakhal, why I am called Toymaker. Is it not strange—the Masterpriest of Neb-ran a maker of Toys, the shrine of the Toad God a workshop for children's playthings?" Evarin didn't wait for an answer. From a sliding cabinet, he took out a doll.

She was, perhaps, the length of my longest finger, molded to the precise proportions of woman, and costumed in the bizarre fashion of the Shainsa dancers. Evarin touched no button or key visible to me, but when he set the figurine on its feet, it executed a whirling, arm-tossing dance, in a familiar and tricky tempo.

"I am, perhaps, in a sense, benevolent," Evarin murmured. He snapped his fingers and the doll sank to her knees and posed there, silent. "Moreover, I have the means and—let us say—the ability to indulge my small fancies. The small daughter of the President of the Federation of Trade Cities was sent such a doll re-

cently. What a pity that Paolo Arimengo was so suddenly impeached and banished!" The Toy-maker clucked his teeth commiseratingly, "Perhaps a little companion—such as this—may comfort little Carmela for her adjustment to her new—position."

He replaced the dancer and pulled down something like a whirligig. "This might interest you," he mused, and set it spinning. I stared, entranced, at the wheeling pattern of lights and shadows that flowed and disappeared, melting in and out of visible patterns. . . . Suddenly I realized what the thing was doing. I wrested my eyes away with an effort. *Had I blanked out?*

Evarin arrested the compelling motion with one finger. "Several of these harmless toys are available to the children of important men," he said absently, "an export of value for our impoverished and exploited world. Unfortunately, an incidence of nervous breakdowns is—ah—interfering somewhat with their sale. The children, of course, are unaffected, and—ah—love them." Evarin set the hypnotic wheel moving again for an instant, glanced sidewise at me, and set it carefully back.

"Now—" Evarin's voice, hard with the silkiness of a tiger-snarl, clawed across sudden silence. "We'll talk business!"

He had something concealed in one hand. "You are probably

wondering how we recognized and found you?" A panel cleared in the wall, and became translucent; confused flickers moved on the surface, then dropped into focus and I realized that the panel was an ordinary television screen and that I was looking down into the well-known interior of the Cafe of Three Rainbows, in the small Terran Colony at Charin. The focus gradually sharpened down on the long, Earth-type bar, where a tall man in spaceman's leathers was talking with a pale-haired Terran girl.

Evarin said at my ear, "By now, Race Cargill has decided that you fell into his trap and the hands of the Ya-men."

It seemed so unbearably funny that my shoulders twitched. Since I landed in Charin, I'd gone to great pains to avoid the Terran colony. And Rakhal, somehow discovering this, had conveniently filled my empty place. By posing as me.

Evarin rasped, "Cargill meant to leave the planet—and something stopped him. *What?* You could be of great use to us, Rakhal—but not with this blood-feud unsettled!"

That needed no elucidation. No Wolfan in his senses will make any bargain with a Dry-towner carrying an unresolved blood-feud. By law and custom, formal blood-feud takes precedence over any other business, public or pri-

vate, and is sufficient and legal excuse for broken promises, neglected duties—even theft or murder.

"We want this feud settled, once and for all," Evarin's voice was low, and unhurried, "and we're not above weighting the scales. This man Cargill can, and has, posed as a Dry-towner. We don't like Earthmen who can spy on us that way. In settling your blood-feud, you would do us a service, and we would be grateful. Look."

He opened his closed hand, displaying something small, curled, inert.

"Every living being emits a characteristic pattern of electrical nerve impulses. As you may have guessed, we have methods of recording these individual patterns, and we have had you and Cargill under observation for a long time. We've had plenty of opportunity to key this—Toy—to Cargill's personal pattern."

On his palm the curled, inert thing stirred and spread wings; a fledgeling bird lay there, small soft body throbbing slightly; half-hidden in a ruff of metallic feathers, I glimpsed a grimly elongated beak. The tiny pinions were feathered with delicate down less than a quarter of an inch long; they beat, with rough insistence, against the Toymaker's prisoning fingers.

"This is not dangerous—to

you. Press this point"—he showed me—"and if Race Cargill is within a certain distance—it is up to you to be within that distance—it will find Cargill and kill him. Unerringly, inescapably and untraceably. We will not tell you the critical distance. And we will give you three days."

He checked my startled exclamation with a gesture. "It is only fair to tell you; this is a test. Within the hour, Cargill will receive a warning. We want no incompetents who must be helped too much. Nor do we want cowards! If you fail, or try to evade the test—" there was green and inhuman malice in his eyes—"we have made another bird."

He was silent, but I thought I understood the complexity of Wolf illogic. "The other bird is keyed to *me*?"

With slow contempt, Evarin shook his head.

"You? You are used to danger and fond of a gamble. Nothing so simple! We have given you three days. If, within that time, the bird you carry has not killed, the other bird will fly, and it will kill. Rakhal Sensor—you have a wife . . ."

Yes, Rakhal had a wife. They could threaten his wife. . . . And his wife was my sister Juli . . .

Everything after that was anticlimax. Of course I had to drink wine with Evarin, the elaborately

formal ritual without which no business agreement on Wolf is valid, and go through equally elaborate courtesies and formalities. Evarin entertained me with gory and technical descriptions of the methods by which the birds—and others of his hellish Toys—did their killing and their other tasks. Miellyn danced into the room and upset our sobriety by perching on my knee and drinking sips from my cup, and pouting prettily when I paid her less attention than she thought she merited. She even whispered something about a rendezvous in the Cafe of the Three Rainbows.

But eventually it was over, and I stepped through a door that twisted, and I spun again through a queer giddy blackness, and found myself outside a blank, windowless wall, back in Charin. I found my way to my lodging in a filthy chak hostel, and threw myself down on the verminous bed.

Believe it or not, I slept.

Later I went out into the red-dening morning. I pulled Evarin's toy from my pocket, unwrapped the silk slightly, and tried to make some sense from my predicament.

The little thing lay innocent and silent in my palm. It couldn't tell me whether it had been keyed to me, the real Cargill, or to Rakhal, using my name and reputation in the Terran Colony. If I

pressed the stud, it might hunt down Rakhal, and all my troubles would be over. On the other hand, if it killed me, presumably the other bird, keyed to Juli, would never fly—which would save her life, but would not get Rindy back for her. And if I delayed past Evarin's deadline, one of the birds would hunt down Juli, and give her a swift and not too painless death.

I spent the day lounging in a chak dive, juggling a dozen plans frantically in my head. Toys, innocent and sinister. Spies, messengers. Toys which killed—and horribly. Toys which could be controlled by the pliant mind of a child—and *every child hates his parents now and again!*

I kept coming back to the same conclusion. Juli was in danger, but she was half a world away, while Rakhal was here in Charin, calmly masquerading as me. There was a child involved, Juli's child, and I had made a promise involving that child; the first step was to get inside Charin's Terran Colony, and see how the land lay.

Charin is a city shaped like a crescent moon, encircling the small Colony of the Trade City; a miniature spaceport, a miniature skyscraper of an HQ, the clustered dwellings of the Terrans who worked there and those who lived with them and catered to their needs.

Entry from one to another—since Charin is in hostile territory, and far beyond the impress of the ordinary Terran law—is through a guarded gateway; but the gate stood wide open, and the guards looked lazy and bored. They carried shockers, but they didn't look as if they'd ever used them. One raised an eyebrow at his companion as I shambled to the gate and requested permission to enter the Terran Zone.

They inquired my name and business. I gave a Dry-towner name I'd used when I was known from Shainsa to the Polar Mountains, and tacked one of the Secret Service passwords to the end of it. They looked at each other again, and one said, "Yeah, this is the guy," and they took me into the booth beside the gate and one of them used an intercom device. Presently they took me along into the HQ building, and into an office that said LEGATE.

Evidently I had walked straight into another trap. One of the guards asked me, straight out, "All right, now. Just what, exactly, is your business in the Terran Colony?"

"Terran business. You'll have to make a visicall to check on me. Put me straight through to Magnusson's office at Central HQ. The name's Race Cargill."

The guard made no move. He was grinning. He said to his partner, "Yeah, that's the guy, all

right, the one we were told to watch out for." He put a hand on my shoulder and spun me around.

There were two of them, and spaceforce guards aren't picked for their good looks. Just the same, I gave a good account of myself, until the inner door burst open and a man stormed out.

"What's all this racket?"

One of the guards got a hammerlock on me, giving my arm a twist. "This Dry-towner bum tried to talk us into making a priority call to Magnusson—the Secret Service Chief, that is. He knew one or two of the Secret Service passwords—that's how he got through the gate. Remember, Cargill passed the word that someone might turn up trying to impersonate him?"

"I remember." The strange man's eyes were wary and cold.

I found myself seized by the guards, and frog-marched to the gate; one of the men pushed my skean back into its clasp, the other pushed me, hard, and I stumbled, and fell sprawling on the chinked street.

First round to Rakhal. He had sprung the trap on me, very neatly.

The street was narrow and crooked, winding along between doubled rows of untidy pebble-houses. I walked for hours.

It was dusk when I realized that I was being followed.

At first it was a glance out of

the corner of my eye, a head seen a little too frequently behind me for coincidence. It developed into a too-persistent footstep in an uneven rhythm; tap-tap-tap, tap-tap-tap.

I had my skcan handy, but I had a hunch this wasn't anything I could settle with a skcan. I ducked into a side street, and waited for my follower.

Nothing.

After a time, I went on, laughing at my imagined fears.

Then, after a time, the soft and persistent footfall thudded behind me again.

I fled down a strange street, where women sat on flower-decked balconies, their open lanterns flowing with fountains and rivulets of gold and orange fire; I raced down quiet streets where furred children crept to doors and watched me pass, with great golden eyes that shone in the dusk.

I dodged into an alley and lay there. Someone not two inches away said softly, "Are you one of us, brother?"

I muttered something surly in his dialect, and a hand seized my elbow. "This way, then."

Taptaptap. TapTAPtap.

I let my arm relax in the hand that guided me. Wherever I was being taken, it might shake off my follower. I flung a fold of my shirt-cloak over my face, and went along.

I stumbled over steps, then

took a jolting stride downward and found myself in a dim room, jammed with dark figures, human and nonhuman. The figures swayed in the dimness, chanting in a dialect not altogether familiar to me; a monotonous wailing chant, with a single recurrent phrase: "*Kamaina! Kamaina!*" beginning on a high note, descending in a series of weird chromatics to the lowest tone the human ear could resolve. The sound made me draw back; even Dry-towners shunned the orgiastic rituals of Kamaina.

My eyes were adapting to the dim light and I saw that most of the crowd were Charin plainsmen and chaks; one or two wore Dry-towner shirtcloaks, and I even thought I saw an Earthman. They were all squatting around small crescent shaped tables, and all intently gazing at a flickery spot of light near the front. I saw an empty place at one table, and let myself drop there, finding the floor soft, as if cushioned. On each table, small, smudging pastilles were burning, and from these cones of ash-tipped fire came the steamy, swimmy smoke that filled the darkness with strange colors. Beside me, an immature chak girl was kneeling, her fettered hands strained tightly back at her sides, her naked breasts pierced with jewelled rings; beneath the pallid fur, cream-colored, flowing around her pointed ears, the ex-

quisite animal face was quite mad.

There were cups and decanters on the table, and another woman tilted a stream of pale phosphorescent fluid into one cup, and proffered it to me.

I took a sip, then another; it was cold and pleasant, and not till the second swallow turned bitter on my tongue did I know what I tasted. I pretended to swallow while the woman's phosphorescent eyes were fixed on me, then somehow contrived to spill the foul stuff down my shirt. I was wary even of the fumes, but there was nothing else I could do. It was *shallavan*, the reeking drug outlawed on every half-way decent planet in the Galaxy.

The scene itself looked like the worst nightmare of a drug-dreamer, ablaze with the colors of the smoking incense, the swaying crowd and their monotonous cries. Quite suddenly there was a blaze of orchid light and someone screamed in raving ecstasy, "*No ki na Nebran n'hai Kamainai!*"

"Kamaieeeeeeeeeeeeeeeena!" shrilled the entranced mob.

Evarin stood in the blaze of the lights.

The Toymaker was as I had seen him last, cat-smooth, gracefully alien, shrouded in a ripple of giddy crimsons. Behind him there was a blackness. I waited until the painful blaze of the lights abated, then, straining to

see past him, I got my worst shock.

A woman stood there, naked to the waist, her hands ritually fettered with little chains that stirred and clashed musically as she walked, stiff-legged; in a frozen dream. Hair like black glass combed into metallic waves banded her brow and naked shoulders, and her eyes were crimson . . .

. . . and her eyes lived, in the dead face. They lived and they were mad with terror although the lips curved in a placid, dreaming smile.

Miellyn.

I realized that Evarin had been speaking for some time in that dialect I could barely understand. His arms were flung high, and his cloak went spilling away from them, rippling like something alive.

"Our world—an old world—"

"Kamaieeeeeena!" whimpered the shrill chorus.

"... humans, all humans, nothing but humans. They would make slaves of us all, slaves to the Children of the Ape . . ."

I blinked and rubbed my eyes to clear them of the incense fumes. I hoped what I saw was an optical illusion, drug-born. Something huge, something dark, was hovering over the girl. She stood placid, hands clasped on her chains, the wreathing smoke glimmering around her jewels, but her

eyes writhed and implored in the still, frozen face.

Then something, I can only call it a sixth sense, warned me that there was someone outside that door. I'd been followed,, probably by the Legate's orders; my follower, tracing me here, had gone away and returned, with reinforcements.

Someone struck a blow on the door, and a stentorian voice bawled, "Open up, there! In the name of the Terran Empire!"

The chanting broke off in ragged quavers. Evarin glanced around, startled and wary. Somewhere a woman screamed; the lights abruptly went out, and a stampede started in the room. I thrust my way forward, with elbows and knees and shoulders, butting through the crowd. A dusky emptiness opened, and yawned, and I got a glimpse of sunlight and open sky, and knew that Evarin had stepped into *somewhere* and was gone. The banging on the door sounded like a whole regiment of spaceforce. I dived toward the shimmer of little stars which marked Miellyn's tiara in the darkness, braving that black horror which hovered above her, and encountered rigid girl-flesh, cold as death.

I grabbed her, and ducked to the side. Every native building on Wolf has half-a-dozen concealed entrances and exits, and I know where to look for them. I pushed

one, and found myself standing in a dark, peaceful street. One lonely moon was setting, low over the rooftops. I put Miellyn on her feet, but she moaned and leaned limply against me. I took off my shirtcloak and put it around her naked shoulders, then hoisted her in my arms. There was a chak-run cookshop down the street, a place I had once known, with an evil reputation and worse food, but it was quiet, and stayed open all night. I turned in at the door, bending under the low lintel.

The inside room was smoky and foul-smelling; I dumped Miellyn on one of the circular couches, sent the frowsy waiter for two bowls of noodles and coffee, handed him a few more coins than the food would warrant, and told him to leave us alone. He drew down the shutters and went.

I stared at the inert girl for a few seconds, then shrugged and started to eat one bowl of the noodles; my own head was still swimming with the fumes of incense and drug, and I wanted it clear. I wasn't quite sure what I would do, but I had Evarin's right-hand girl, and I meant to use her.

The noodles were greasy, but they were hot, and I ate all of one bowl before Miellyn stirred and whimpered and put up one hand, with a little musical clashing of chains, to her hair. Finding that the folds of my shirtcloak inter-

fered, she made a convulsive movement and stared around her with growing bewilderment and dismay.

"You! What am I—"

"There was a riot," I said briefly, "and Evarin ditched you. And you can stop thinking what you're thinking. I put my cloak on you because you were bare to the waist and it didn't look so good." I stopped to think that over, then grinned and amended, "I mean, I couldn't haul you around the street that way, it looked good enough."

To my amazement she gave a shaky giggle. "If you'll—" and held out her fettered hands. I chuckled and snapped the links. It didn't take much strength—they were symbolic ornaments, not real chains, and many Wolf women wear them all the time.

Miellyn drew up her draperies and fastened them so that she was decently covered, then tossed me back my shirtcloak. "Rakhal, when I saw you there—"

"Latcr." I shoved the bowl of noodles toward her.

"Eat it," I ordered, "you're still doped; the food will clear your head." I picked up one of the mugs of coffee, and emptied it at a single swallow. "What were you doing in that place?"

Without warning she flung herself across the table, throwing her arms around my neck. For a minute, startled, I let her cling, then reached up and firmly unfastened

her hands. "None of that, now. I fell for it once, and it landed me in the middle of the mudpie."

Her fingers clutched at me with a feverish, tense grip. "Please, please listen to me! Have you still got the bird, the Toy? You haven't set it off yet? Don't, don't, don't, don't, Rakhal, you don't know what Evarin is, what he's doing—" the words poured out of her in a flood, uncontrollable and desperate. "He's won so many men like you—don't let him have you too, they say you're an honest man, you worked once for Terra, the Terrans would believe you if you went to them and told them—Rakhal, take me to the Terran zone, take me there, take me there where they'll protect me from Evarin—"

At first I had leaned forward to protest, then waited and let the torrent of entreaty run on and on. At last she lay quiet, exhausted, her head fallen forward against my shoulder, her hands still clutching at me. The musky *shallavan* mingled with the flower-scents of her hair. At last, heavily, I said, "Kid, you and your Toymaker have both got me all wrong. I'm not Rakhal Sensor."

"You're not—" she drew back, regarding me in dismay and disbelief. "Then who—?"

"Race Cargill. Terran Intelligence."

She stared at me, her mouth wide like a child's.

Then she laughed. She *laughed*—I thought she was hysterical, and stared at her in consternation. Then, as her wide red eyes met mine, with all the mischief of Wolf illogic—I started to laugh.

"Cargill—you can take me to the Terrans where Evarin—"

"Damn!" I exploded, "I can't take you anywhere, girl, I've got to find Rakhal!" I hauled out the Toy and slapped it down on the greasy table. "I don't suppose you know which of us this is supposed to kill?"

"I know nothing about the Toys."

"You know plenty about the Toymaker," I said sourly.

"I thought so. Until last night." She burst out, in an explosion of passionate anger, "It's not a religion! It's a *front*! For drugs and politics and—and every other filthy thing! I've heard a lot about Rakhal Sensar! Whatever you think of him, he's too decent to be mixed up in that!"

The pattern was beginning to take shape in my mind. Rakhal had been on the trail of the matter-transmitter, and had fallen afoul of the Toymaker. Evarin's words, *you were very clever at escaping our surveillance for a while*, made sense to me now; Juli had given me the clue. *He smashed Rindy's Toys*. It had sounded like the act of a madman, but it made plain, good sense.

I said, "There's some distance limitation on this thing, I understand. If I lock it inside a steel box and drop it in the desert, I'll guarantee it won't bother anybody. Miellyn, I don't suppose you'd care to have a try at stealing the other one for me?"

"Why should *you* worry about Sensar's wife?" she flashed.

For some reason it seemed important to set her straight. "My sister," I explained. "The thing to do, I suppose, is to find Rakhal first—" I stopped, remembering something. "I can find Rakhal with that scanning device in the workshops. Take *me* to the Master-shrine, will you? Where's the nearest street-shrine?"

"No! Oh, no, I don't dare!"

I had to argue and plead, and finally threaten her, reminding her that except for me she would have been torn to pieces, or worse, by a crowd of drugged and raving fanatics, before she finally consented to take me to a transmitter. She was shaking when she set her foot into the patterned stones. "I *know* what Evarin can do!" Then her red mouth twitched, in tremulous mischief. "You'll have to stand closer than that, the transmitters are meant for only one person!"

I stooped and put my arm round her. "Like this?"

"Like this," she whispered, pressing herself against me. A swirl of dizzy darkness swung around my head; the street van-

ished, and we stepped out into the terminal room in the Master-shrine, under a skylight darkened with the last splinters of the setting sun. Distant little hammering noises made a ringing in my ears.

Miellyn whispered, "Evarin's not here, but he might jump through at any minute!" I paid no attention.

"Exactly where on the planet are we?"

Miellyn shook her head. "No one knows that except Evarin himself. There are no doors, just the transmitters—when we want to go outside, we jump through them. The scanning device is through there—we'll have to go through the Little Ones' workroom." She opened the door of the workroom, and we walked through.

Not for years had I known that special feeling—thousands of eyes, all boring holes in the center of my back. I was sweating by the time we reached the farther door and it closed, safe and blessedly opaque, behind us. Miellyn was shivering with reaction.

"Steady," I warned. "We've still got to get out. Where's that scanner?"

She touched the panel. "I'm not sure I can focus it accurately, though. Evarin's never let me touch it."

"How does it work?"

"The principle is just the same as the matter-transmitter; that is, it lets you look through to any-

where, but without jumping. It uses a tracer mechanism, just as the Toys do," she added. "If Rakhal's electrical-impulse pattern were on file anywhere, I could—wait! I know how we can do it! Give me the Toy." I drew it out; she took it quickly and unwrapped it. "Here's a good, quick way to find out which of you this bird is intended to kill!"

I looked at the fledgeling thing, soft and innocent in her palm. "Suppose it's turned on me?"

"I wasn't going to set it off." Miellyn pushed aside the feathers, revealing a tiny crystal set into the bird's skull. "The memory-crystal. If it's tuned to your nerve-patterns, you'll see yourself in the scanner, as if it were a mirror. If you see Rakhal—"

She touched the crystal against the surface of the screen. Little flickers of "snow" danced across the clearing panel; then, abruptly, a picture dropped into focus, the turned-away back of a man in a leather jacket. The man turned, slowly, and I saw, first, a familiar profile, then saw the profile become a scarred mask, more hideous than my own. His lips were moving; he was talking to someone beyond the range of the lens.

Miellyn asked, "Is that—"

"It's Rakhal, yes. Move the focus, if you can, try to get a look out of a window, or something. Charin's a big city. If we could get a look at a landmark—"

Rakhal went on talking, soundlessly, like television without sound. Abruptly Miellyn said "There!" She had brought the scanning device within range of a window; Rakhal was inside a room that looked out on a high pylon and two or three uprights that looked like a bridge. I recognized the place at once, and so did Miellyn.

"The Bridge of Summer Snows, in Charin. I can find him now. Come on, turn it off, and let's get out of here." I was turning away from the screen when Miellyn gave a smothered scream.

"Look!"

Rakhal had turned his back on our scanning device, and for the first time we could see the person he was talking to. A hunched and catlike shoulder twisted, revealing a sinuous neck, a handsome and arrogant face—

"Evarin!" I swore. "He knows, then, that I'm not Rakhal. He's probably known all along. Come on, girl, we're getting out of here." She shoved the silk-wrapped bird into her skirt pocket and we ran through the workroom. We banged the workroom door shut behind us, and I shoved a heavy divan against it, barricading it shut.

Miellyn was already inside the recess where the Toad-God squatted. "There is a street-shrine just beyond the Bridge of Summer Snow. Hold me, hold me tight,

it's a long jump—" suddenly she froze in my arms, with a convulsive shudder. "Evarin—he's jumping in! Quick!"

Space recled around us.

We landed inside a street-shrine; I glimpsed the pylon, and the bridge, and the rising sun; then there was the giddy, internal wrench, a blast of icy air whistled around us; and we found ourselves gazing out at the Polar mountains, ringed in their eternal sunlight.

We jumped again, the wrenching sickness of disorientation forcing a moan from the girl, and dark clouds shivered around us; I looked out on an unfamiliar expanse of sand and wasteland and dust-bleared stars. Miellyn whimpered. "Evarin knows what I'm doing, he's jumping us all around the planet, he can work the controls with his mind . . . Psychokinetics . . . I can do it, a little, only I've never . . . oh, hang on to me, tight, tight, I've never dared do this—"

Then began one of the most amazing duels ever fought. Miellyn would make some tiny movement; we would fall, blind and dizzy, through the blackness; half-way through the giddy spin, a new direction would wrench at us, and we would be thrust *elsewhere*—and look out on a different street. One instant we were in the Kharsa—I actually saw the door of the spaceport cafe, and smelled hot coffee—and an in-

stant later it was blinding noon, with crimson fronds waving overhead, over the roofs of gilt temples. We froze and burned, moonlight, noon, dim twilight, in the terrible giddiness of hyperspace.

Then, suddenly, I caught a glimpse of the pylon, the bridge; luck or an oversight had landed us again for half a second in Charin. The blackness started to reel down again, but my reflexes are fast, and I made one swift, scrabbling step forward. We lurched, then sprawled, locked together, on the sharp stones of the bridge outside the street-shrine; bruised and bloody, but alive—and at our destination!

I lifted Miellyn to her feet; her eyes were dizzy with pain. Clinging together, the ground swaying madly under our feet, we fled along the Bridge of Summer Snows. At the far side, I looked up at the pylon. Judging by the angle, the place where we'd seen Rakhal couldn't be far away. In this street there was a wineshop, a silk market, and one small private house. I walked up, and banged on the door.

Silence. I knocked again. From within there came a child's shrill question, a deeper voice hushing it, and the door opened, to reveal a scarred face that drew back into a hideous facsimile of a grin.

"I thought it might be you, Car-gill," Rakhal said, "You've taken longer than I expected. Come in."

He hadn't changed much, except for the crimson, ugly scars that drew up mouth and nostril and jawline. His face *was* worse than mine. The mask tensed as he saw Miellyn, but he backed away to let us in, and shut the door behind us.

A little girl, in a fur smock, stood watching us. She had red hair like Juli's, and evidently she knew just who I was, for she looked at me quite calmly, without surprise. Had Juli told her about me?

"Rindy," Rakhal said quietly, "go into the other room." The little girl, still staring at me, did not move. Rakhal added, in a gentle, curiously moderate voice, "Do you still carry a skean, Race?"

I shook my head. "That's Juli's daughter. I'm not going to kill her father under her eyes." Suddenly my rage spilled over. "To hell with your damned Dry-town blood-feud and codes and your filthy Toad-god!"

Rakhal's voice was harsher now. "Rindy. I told you to get out."

I took a step toward the little girl. "Don't go, Rindy. I'm going to take her to Juli, Rakhal. Rindy, don't you want to go to your mother?" I held out my arms to her.

Rakhal made a menacing gesture; Miellyn darted between us, and picked up Rindy in her arms. The child struggled and whimpered, but Miellyn took two quick

steps and carried her bodily through an open door.

Rakhal began, slowly, to laugh.

"You're as stupid as ever, Cargill. You still don't realize—I knew Juli would come straight to you, if she was frightened enough. I thought it would lure you out of hiding—you filthy coward! Six years hiding in the Terran zone! If you'd had the guts to walk out with me when I engineered that final deal, we would have had the biggest thing on Wolf!"

"Doing Evarin's dirty work?"

"You know damn well that had nothing to do with Evarin. It was for us—and Shainsa. Evarin—I might have known he'd get to you! That girl—if you've spoiled my plans—" Abruptly he whipped out his skean and came at me. "Son of the ape! I might have known better than to depend on you! I'll finish your meddling, this time!"

I felt the skean drive home, slicing flesh and ribs, and staggered back, grunting with pain. I grappled with him, forcing back his hand. My side burned furiously, and I wanted to kill Rakhal and I couldn't, and at the same time I was raging because I didn't want to fight the crazy fool, I wasn't even mad at him—

Miellyn flung the door open, shrieking. There was a flutter of silk—and then the Toy was darting, a small whirring droning horror, straight at Rakhal's eyes.

There was no time even to warn him. I bent and butted him in the stomach; he grunted, doubled, and fell, out of the path of the diving Toy. It whirled in frustration, hovered, dived again. Rakhal writhed in agony, drawing up his knees, clawing inside his shirt. "You damned—I didn't want to use this—" He opened his closed fist, and suddenly there was another Toy in the room. An identical fledgeling bird, and this one was diving at me—and in a split second I understood. Evarin had made the same arrangement with Rakhal, as with me.

From the door came a child's wild shriek.

"Daddy!"

Abruptly the birds collapsed in mid-air and went limp. They fell, inanimate, to the floor, and lay there, quivering. Rindy dashed across the room, her small skirts flying, and grabbed one of the vicious things in each hand.

She stood there, tears pouring down her little face. Dark veins stood out like narrow cords on her temples. "Break them, *quick*. I can't hang on to them any longer—"

Rakhal grabbed one of the Toys from a little fist, and smashed it under his heel. It shrilled and died. The other screamed like a living bird as his foot scrunched on the tiny feathers. He drew an agonized breath, his hands clutching his belly where I'd butted him.

"That blow was foul, Cargill, but I guess I know why you did it. You—" He stopped and said shamefacedly, "you saved my life. You know what that means. Did you know you were doing it?"

I nodded. It meant the end of the blood-feud. However we had wronged one another, this ended it, finally and forever.

He said, "Better get that skean out of your ribs, you damn' fool. Here—" with a quick jerk he drew it out. "Not more than half an inch. Your rib must have turned it. Just a flesh wound. Rindy—"

She sobbed noisily, hiding her head on his shoulder. "The other Toys . . . hurt you . . . when I was mad at you, Daddy, only . . ." she dug her fists in her red eyes. "I wasn't that mad at you, I wasn't that mad at anybody . . . not even . . . him . . ."

He said over her head, "The Toys activate a child's subconscious resentments against his parents. That also means a child can control them—for a few seconds; no adult can."

"Juli told me you threatened Rindy—"

He chuckled. "What else could I have done that would have scared Juli enough to send her to you? Juli's proud, nearly as proud as you, you stiffnecked son of the ape! She had to be desperate."

He tossed it all aside with a shrug. "You've got Miellyn to take you through the transmitters. Go

back to the Master-shrine, and tell Evarin I'm dead. In the Trade City, they think I'm Cargill; I can go in and out as I choose. I'll 'vise Magnusson, and have him send soldiers to guard the street-shrines; Evarin may try to escape through one of them."

"Terra hasn't enough guards on all Wolf to cover the street-shrines in Charin alone," I objected, "and I can't go back with Miellyn." I explained why, and Rakhal pursed his lips and whistled when I described the fight in the transmitters.

"You have all the luck! I've never been near enough to be sure how the transmitters work, and I'll bet you didn't begin to understand! Well, we'll do it the hard way. We'll face Evarin down in his own shrine—if Rindy's with us, we needn't worry."

I was shocked at his casual suggestion. "You'd take a child into that?"

"What else is there to do?" Rakhal inquired logically, "Rindy can control the Toys, and neither you nor I could do that, if Evarin should decide to throw his whole arsenal at us!" He called Rindy to him again, and spoke softly. She looked from her father to me, and back again to her father, then smiled, and stretched out her small hand to me.

While we hunted for another street-shrine—Miellyn had some esoteric reason for not wanting to

use the same one we'd landed in—I asked Rakhal point-blank, "Are you working for Terra? Or for the resistance movement? Or for the Dry-towns?"

He shook his head. "I'm working for myself. I just want one thing, Race. I want the Dry-towns, and the rest of Wolf, to have a voice in their own government. Any planet which makes a substantial contribution to Galactic science, by the laws of the Terran Empire, gets the status of an independent commonwealth. If a Dry-towner discovers anything as valuable as a matter-transmitter, Wolf gets dominion status. And incidentally, I get a nice fat bonus, and an official position."

Before I could answer, Miellyn touched my arm. "This is the shrine."

Rakhal picked up Rindy, and the three of us crowded close together. The street swayed and vanished, and I felt the familiar dip and swirl of blackness. Rindy screamed with terror and pain, then the world straightened out again. Rindy was crying, dabbing smeary fists at her face. "Daddy, my nose is bleeding—"

Miellyn bent and wiped the blood from the snubby nose. Rakhal set his daughter on her feet.

"The chak workroom, Race. Smash everything you see. Rindy, if anything comes at us, stop it—stop it, quick!"

Her wide round eyes blinked,

and she nodded, a solemn little nod. We flung open the door of the elves' workshop with a shout. The ringing of the fairy anvils shattered into a thousand dissonances as I kicked over a workbench and half-finished Toys smashed in confusion to the floor.

The chaks scattered like rabbits before our advance. I smashed half-finished Toys, tools, filigree and jewels, stamping everything out with my heavy boots. A tiny doll, proportioned like a woman, dashed at me, shrilling in a high supersonic shriek; I put my foot on her and ground the life out of her. She screamed like a living woman as she came apart. Her blue eyes rolled from her head and lay on the floor watching me, still alive; I crushed the blue jewels under my foot.

I was drunk with crushing and shattering and ruining when I heard Miellyn shriek in warning, and turned to see Evarin standing in the doorway. He raised both hands in a sardonic gesture, then turned, and with a queer, loping, inhuman run, headed for the transmitter.

"Rindy," Rakhal panted, "can you block the transmitter?"

Instead Rindy screamed. "We've got to get out! The house is falling down! It's going to fall on us—look—look at the roof!"

Transfixed by her horror, I looked up, to see a wide rift opening in the ceiling. The skylight

shattered, broke, and daylight poured through the cracking, translucent walls. Rakhal snatched up Rindy, protecting her from the falling debris with his head and shoulders; I grabbed Miellyn around the waist, and we ran for the rift that was widening in the cracking wall. We shoved through, just before the roof caved in, the walls collapsed and we found ourselves standing on a bare, grassy hillside, looking down in shock and horror, as, below us, section after section of what was, apparently, bare hill and rock caved in and collapsed into dusty rubble.

Miellyn cried hoarsely, "Run! Run—hurry!"

I didn't understand, but I ran.

Then the shock of a great explosion rocked the earth, hurling me to the ground, Miellyn falling in a heap on top of me. Rakhal stumbled, went down to his knees. When I could see again, I looked at the hillside.

There was nothing left of Evarin's hideaway, or of the Master-shrine of Nebran, but a great, gaping hole, still oozing smoke and black dust.

"Destroyed! All destroyed!" Rakhal raged. "The workroom, all the science of the Toys, the secret of the transmitters—" He beat his fists furiously. "Our one chance to learn—"

"You're lucky you got out alive," said Miellyn quietly. "Where are we?"

I looked down, and stared in amazement. Spread out below us lay the Kharsa, and straight ahead, the white skyscraper of the Terran HQ and the big spaceport. I pointed.

"Down there. Rakhal, you can make your peace with the Terrans, and with Juli. And you, Miellyn—"

Her smile was shaky. "I can't go into the Terran Zone like this. Have you a comb? Rakhal, lend me your shirtcloak, my robes are torn, and—"

"Stupid female, worrying about a thing like that at a time like this!" Rakhal's look was like murder. I put my comb into her hand, then, abruptly saw something in the symbols embroidered across her breasts.

I reached out, and ripped the cloth away.

"Cargill!" she protested angrily, turning crimson and covering her bared breasts with both hands. "Is this the place—and before a child, too—"

I hardly heard her. "Look," I exclaimed, snatching at Rakhal's sleeve, "look at the symbols embroidered into the God! You can read the old nonhuman glyphs, I've seen you do it! I'll bet the formula is written out there for everyone to read! Look here, Rakhal! I can't read it, but I'll bet it's the equations for the matter-transmitter."

Rakhal bent his head over the

torn robe. "I believe you have it!" he exclaimed, shaken and breathless. "It may take years to translate the glyph, but I can do it! I'll do it, or die trying!" His scarred face looked almost handsome, and I grinned at him.

"If Juli leaves enough of you, once she finds out what you did to her! Look, Rindy's asleep. Poor little kid, we'd better get her down to her mother."

We walked abreast, and Rakhal said softly, "Like old times, Race."

It wasn't like old times, and I knew he would see it, too, once his exultation sobered. I had out-

grown my love for intrigue, and I had a feeling this was Rakhal's last adventure, too. It would take him, as he said, years to work out the equations for the transmitter. And I had a feeling that my own solid, ordinary desk was going to look pretty good to me in the morning.

But I knew now that I'd never leave Wolf. It was my own beloved sun that was rising. My sister was waiting down below, and I'd given her back her child. My friend was walking at my side. What more could a man want?

I looked at Miellyn, and smiled.

Afternotes

Many letters commenting on our first two issues have come in to the offices of VENTURE S F, and we are grateful for them. Considering that no one magazine can hope to please everybody, we were mildly astonished that the letters were about 90% favorable. We would like to print some of them—but the prevailing opinion on *that* idea was one of approval for the no-letter-column policy we've followed so far. However, we do think you might like to know that Poul Anderson's "Virgin Planet" and Tom Godwin's "Too Soon to Die" received the most votes; both Theodore Sturgeon's "The Girl Had Guts" and Walter M. Miller, Jr.'s "Vengeance for Nikolai" were either enormously liked or found most upsetting (which, to be truthful, was the reaction we had looked for). Mr. Miller, incidentally, preferred Mr. Sturgeon's story; Mr. Sturgeon preferred Mr. Miller's story—thought it near-perfect.

The one aspect of the stories in general that was most strongly appreciated was, as one reader put it, "... a deeper examination of human character than is found in the average story..." That reaction was gratifying, because that's what we're trying to achieve. . . . And we hope you will continue to tell us your opinions. —RPM

AFFAIR WITH A GREEN MONKEY

by THEODORE STURGEON

*Loolyo was—different. Which was why Fritz
didn't worry about leaving Alma alone with him.*

*Alma worried, though—she discovered
that the "difference" could kill her . . .*

THERE WAS THIS TRAINED nurse who retired at 24 to marry a big guy, six foot seven, top brass in a Government agency. He was home only weekends. His name was Fritz Rhys. About sick people, wrong people, different people, he was a very understanding guy. It was his business to understand them.

So one night he went for a walk with his wife Alma down to this little park on the river front where they could get some air. There was a fountain and a bench where they could sit and see the lights across the water and flowerbeds and all that, and this particular Sunday night there was a bunch of punks, eight of them, kicking someone to death over by the railing. Fritz Rhys understood right away what was happening and what to do, and in three big jumps he was right in the middle of it. He snatched a hunk of broom-handle away from one of the kids just before it got buried

in the victim, and then they all saw him and that was the end of that. They cut out of there, ducking around Alma where she stood as if she was dangerous too.

Alma ran over to where Fritz knelt and helped him turn the man over. She got Fritz's display handkerchief and sponged the blood and broken teeth out of the slack mouth and turned the head to one side, and did the other things trained nurses are trained to do.

"Anything broken?"

She said yes. "His arm. Maybe internal injuries too. We'd better get an ambulance."

"Home's quicker. Hey boy! You're all right now. Up you go!" So by the time the man got his eyes open Fritz had him on his feet.

They half carried him up the steps and over the foot-bridge that crosses the Drive, and Fritz was right, they had him back to their apartment forty minutes sooner than it would have taken to call a wagon.

She was going to phone but he stopped her. "We can handle it. Get some pajamas." He looked at the injured man draped over one big arm. "Get some of yours. He won't mind."

They cleaned him up and splinted the arm. It wasn't so bad. Bruises on the ribs and buttocks, and then the face, but he was lucky. "Give him one week and one dentist and you'll never know it happened."

"He will."

"Oh, that," Fritz said.

She said, "What do you suppose they did it for?"

"Green monkey."

"Oh," she said, and they left the man sleeping and went to bed. At five in the morning Fritz rose quietly and got dressed and she didn't wake up until he thumped his suitcase down by the bed and bent over to kiss her goodbye.

She gave him his kiss and then came all the way awake and said, "Fritz! You're not just—leaving, like always?"

He wanted to know why not, and she pointed at the guest room. "Leave me with—"

He laughed at her. "Believe me, honey, you haven't got a thing to worry about."

"But he . . . I . . . oh, Fritz!"

"If anything happens you can call me."

"In *Washington*?" She sat up and sort of hugged the sheet around her. "Oh, why can't I just

send him to a hospital where—"

He had a way sometimes of being so patient it was insulting. He said, "Because I want to talk to him, help him, when he's better, and you know what hospitals are. You just keep him happy and tell him not to leave until I can have a talk with him." Then he said something so gentle and careful that she knew when to shut up: "And let's say no more about it, shall we?" so she said no more about it and he went back to Washington.

The pajamas were small for him but not much and he was about her age, too. (Fritz Rhys was quite a bit older.) He had a name that she got fond of saying, and small strong hands. All day Monday he was kind of dazed and didn't say much, only smiled thanks for the eggnog and bouillon and bedpan and so on. Tuesday he was up and about. His clothes were back from the cleaners and mended and he put them on and they sat around the whole day talking. Alma read books a good deal and she read aloud to him. She played a lot of music on the phonograph too. Whatever she liked, he liked even better. Wednesday she took him to the dentist, once in the morning to get the stubs ground down and impressions, and again in the afternoon to have the temporary acrylic caps cemented in. By this time the lip swelling was all but gone, and

with the teeth fixed up she found herself spending a lot of time just looking at his mouth. His hair shone in the sun and she half believed it would shine in the dark too. He somehow never answered her when she wanted to know where he came from. Maybe there was too much laughing going on at the time. They laughed a whole lot together. Anyway it was some place where you couldn't get spaghetti. She took him to an Italian restaurant for dinner and had to teach him how to spin it on his fork. They had a lot of fun with that and he ate plenty of it.

On Wednesday night—late—she phoned her husband.

"Alma! What is it? Are you all right?"

She did not answer until he called her name twice again, and then she said, all whispery, "Yes, Fritz. I'm all right. Fritz, I'm frightened!"

"Of what?"

She didn't say anything, though he could hear her trying.

"Is it the . . . what's his name, anyway?"

"Loolyo."

"Julio?"

She sang: "Lool-yo."

"Well, then. What's he done?"

"N-nothing."

"Well then—are you afraid of anything he might do?"

"Oh, no!"

"You're so right. I understood that when I left, or he wouldn't

be there. Now then: he hasn't done anything, and you're sure he won't, and I'm sure he won't, so—why call me up this time of night?"

She didn't say anything.

"Alma?"

"Fritz," she said. She was swift, hoarse: "Come home. Come right home."

"Act your age!"

"Your three minutes are up. Signal when through please."

"Yes operator."

"Alma! Are you calling from an outside phone? Why aren't you home?"

"I couldn't bear to have him hear me," she whispered. "Good-bye, Fritz." He might have said something more to her, but she hung up and went home.

On Thursday she phoned for the car and packed a picnic and they went to the beach. It was too cold to swim but they sat on the sand most of the day and talked, and sang some. "I'm frightened," she said again, but she said it to herself. Once they talked about Fritz. She asked him why those boys had clobbered him and he said he didn't know. She said Fritz knew. "He says you're a green monkey," and she explained it: "He says if you catch a monkey in the jungle and paint it green, all the other monkeys will tear it to pieces because it's different. Not dangerous, just different."

"Different how?" Loolyo asked,

in a quiet voice, about himself.

She had a lot of answers to that, but they were all things of her own and she didn't mention them. She just said again that Fritz knew. "He's going to help you."

He looked at her and said, "He must be a good man."

She thought that over and said, "He's a very understanding man."

"What does he do in Washington?"

"He's an expert on rehabilitation programs."

"Rehabilitation of what?"

"People."

"Oh. . . . I'm looking forward to Saturday."

She told him, "I love you." He turned to her as she sat round-eyed, all her left knuckles in her mouth so that the ring hurt her.

"You don't mean that."

"I didn't mean to say it."

After that, and on Friday, they stayed together, but like the wires on your lamp cord, never touching. They went to the zoo, where Loolyo looked at the animals excited as a child, except the monkeys, which made them be quiet and go quickly to something else. The longer the day got the quieter they were together, and at dinner they said almost nothing, and after that they even stopped looking at each other. That night when it was darkest she went to his room and opened the door and closed it again behind her. She

did not turn on the light. She said, "I don't care . . ." and again, "I don't care," and wept in a whisper.

Loolyo was alone in the apartment when Fritz came home. "Shopping," he answered the big man's question. "Good afternoon, Mr. Rhys. I'm glad to see you."

"Fritz," instructed Fritz. "You're looking chipper. Alma been good to you?"

Loolyo smiled enough to light up the place.

"What'd you say your name was? Julio? Oh yeh, Loolyo, I remember. Well, Lou m'lad, let's have our little talk. Sit down over there and let me have a good look at you." He took a good long look and then grunted and nodded, satisfied. "You ashamed of yourself, boy?"

"Wh . . . ? Ashamed? Uh—no, I don't think so."

"Good! That means this doesn't have to be a long talk at all. Just to make it even shorter, I want you to know from the start that I know what you are and you don't have to hide it and it doesn't matter a damn to me and I'm not going to pry. Okay?"

"You *know*?"

Fritz boomed a big laugh. "Don't worry so, Louie! Everybody you meet doesn't see what I see. It's my business to see these things and understand them."

Loolyo shifted nervously. "What

things are you talking about?"

"Shape of the hands. Way you walk, way you sit, way you show your feelings, sound of your voice. Lots more. All small things, any one or two or six might mean nothing. But all together—I'm on to you, I understand you. I'm not asking, I'm telling. And I don't *care*. It's just that I can tell you how to behave so you don't get mobbed again. You want to hear it or don't you?"

Loolyo didn't look a thing in the world but puzzled. Fritz stood up and pulled off his jacket and shirt and threw them on the corner of the couch and fell back in the big chair, altogether relaxed. He began to talk like a man who loves talking and who knows what to say because he's said it all before, knows he's right, knows he says it well. "A lot of people live among people all their lives and never find out this one simple thing about people: human beings cease to be human when they congregate, and a mob is a monster. If you think of a mob as a living thing and you want to get its I.Q., take the average intelligence of the people there and divide it by the number of people there. Which means that a mob of fifty has somewhat less intelligence than an earthworm. No one person could sink to its level of cruelty and lack of principle. It thinks that anything that is different is dangerous, and it thinks it's protect-

ing itself by tearing anything that's different to small bloody bits. The difference—which-is-dangerous changes with the times. Men have been mob-murdered for wearing beards, and for not wearing beards. For saying the right series of words in what the mob thinks is the wrong order. For wearing or not wearing this or that article of clothing, or tattoo, or piece of skin."

"That's . . . ugly," Loolyo said.

"That's . . . ugly," Fritz repeated, with completely accurate and completely insulting mimicry, then made his big roar of laughter and told Loolyo not to get mad. "You've just made a point for me, but wait a bit till I get to it." He leaned back and went on with his speech. "Now, of all 'dangerous' differences which incite the mob, the one that hits 'em hardest, quickest and nastiest is any variation in sex. It devolves upon every human being to determine which sex he belongs to and then to *be* that as loud as possible for as long as he lives. To the smallest detail men dress like men and women dress like women, and God help them if they cross the line. A man has got to look and act like a man. That isn't a right. It's a duty. And no matter how weird mankind gets in its rules and regulations—whether manhood demands shoulder-length hair for a Cavalier or waist-length for a Sikh or a crew-cut for a Bavarian, the rules

must be followed or bloody well else.

"Now, as for you people," Fritz said, sitting up and flipping his long index finger down and forward, like a sharpshooter practicing a snap shot, "you are what you are just like everybody else. But I'm not talking about what you are—that's self-evident—only about how you're treated.

"The only big difference between you and normal people, in those terms, is that they must display their sex and insist on it, and you may not. But I mean, you one hundred percent by God *may* not, not in public. Among your own kind you can camp and scream and giggle to your heart's content, but don't let yourself get caught at it. It would be better not to do it at all."

"Now wait, wait, wait," Loolyo barked. "Hold on here. What has this got to do with me?"

Fritz opened his eyes big and round and then closed them and slumped into the cushions. He said in a very very tired voice, "Aw, now lookit. You're not going to bust into the middle of this and make me go all the way back to the beginning."

"I just want to know what makes you think—"

"Sit down and shut up!" Fritz bellowed, and he was the man who could do it. "Do you or do you not want to know how to go about among human beings with-

out getting your girlish face kicked down your throat?"

Loolyo stood for a while, pale, his bright eyes drawn down to angry slits. It was as if Fritz's question didn't reach him all at once, but had to percolate in. Slowly he sat down again. "Go ahead then."

Fritz nodded approvingly. "I hate a bad liar, Louie, and you were about to try the one *lic* you could never get away with. Not with anyone who understands you. . . . All right then. My advice to you: Be a man. Not any old man, not mankind, but manhood. To do this you don't need to play pro football and grow hair on your chest and seduce every third woman you meet long as she's female. All you have to do is hunt, fish (or talk sense about 'em as if you had) and go bug-eyed when the girls go by. If a sunset moves you so much you *have* to express yourself, do it with a grunt and a dirty word. Or you say, 'That Beethoven, he blows a cool symphony.' Never champion a real underdog unless it's a popular type, like a baseball team. Always treat other men as if you were sore at something and will wipe it off on them if they give you the slightest excuse. I mean sore, Louie, not vexed or in a snit. And stay away from women. They have an intuition that'll find you out nine times out of ten. The tenth time she falls for you, and there's nothing funnier."

"I think," Loolyo said after a time, "that you hate human beings."

"I understand 'em, that's all. Do you think I hate you?"

"Maybe you should. I'm not what you think I am."

Fritz Rhys shook his head and quietly cursed. "All right. Wear your cellophane mask if it makes you feel better. I don't give a damn about you or what you do. Do what I tell you and you can live in a man's world. Go on the way you are and in that last split second before they kick your brains in, you'll admit I was right."

"I'm glad you told me. It's what I came here to find out," Loolyo said finally.

At the sound of a key in the lock Fritz sprang up and ran to the door. It was Alma. Fritz took her packages and kissed her. While he was kissing her she looked past him to the living room and Loolyo, and as soon as he was finished she went and stood in the doorway. Fritz stood behind her, watching. Loolyo raised his head slowly and saw her and started and smiled shyly.

Fritz stepped up and took her shoulder and turned her around because just then he had to see her face. When he saw it he gently bit his lower lip and said, "Oh," and went back to his chair. He was a man who understood things real quick.

Alma ignored him, all eyes for Loolyo. "What has he been saying to you?"

He didn't answer. He looked at the carpet. Fritz jumped up and rapped, "Well, are you willing to tell the lady?"

"Why?"

"Promise me you will, every word, and I'll let her take the car and give you a lift out of town. You are from out of town? Yes. Well, I think you owe it to each other. What do you say, Louie?"

"Fritz! Have you gone cr—"

"You better persuade him to play it that way, honey. It's the last chance you'll have to see him alone."

"Loolyo . . ." she whispered, "come on, then."

Loolyo stared at the big man. Fritz grinned and said, "Ev'ry God damned word, mind. I'll quiz her when she gets back and take it out on her if you don't. Alma, try not to make it more'n two, three hours. Okay?"

"Come on then," she said stiffly, and they went out. Fritz went and got a beer and came back and flopped in the chair, drinking and laughing and scratching his chest.

In the car he said only "Up-town, over the bridge," and then fell into a silence that lasted clear to the toll-booths. They turned north and at last he began to talk. He told her all about it. She said nothing until he had quite

finished; then: "How could you let him suggest such a filthy thing?"

He laughed bitterly. "Let him? . . . When he understands something, that—is—it."

There was nothing she could say to this; she knew it better than anything in life. He said, "But I guess I'm a green monkey anyhow. Well . . . I should be grateful. He told me where my kind can hide, and how to act when we're out in the open. I'd about given up."

"What do you mean?" He would not answer her, but rode with his face turned away. He seemed to be scanning the roadside to the right.

Suddenly: "Here," he said. "Stop here."

Startled, she pulled off the pavement and stopped. There's a new parkway north of the bridge, and for miles it parallels the old road. Between them is a useless strip of land, mauled by construction machines, weedy and deserted. She looked at it and at him, and if she was going to speak again the expression on his face stopped her. It was filled with sadness and longing and something else, a sort of blue-mood laughter. He said, "I'm going home now."

She looked at her hands on the wheel and suddenly could not see them. He touched her arm and said gently, "You'll have to get over it, Alma. It can't work. Noth-

ing could make it work. It would kill you. Try to get back with your husband. He's better equipped for you. I'm not, not at all."

"Stop it," she whispered. "Stop it, stop it."

Loolyo sighed deeply, put his arms around her and kissed her, rough, gentle, thorough, face, mouth, tongue, ears, neck, touching her body hungrily while he did it. She clung to him and cried. He put her arms from him and pressed something into her hand and vaulted out of the car, ran across the shoulder, jumped over the retaining wall and disappeared. It was only a low wall. He didn't disappear behind anything or into anything or in the distance. He just disappeared. She called him twice and then got out and ran to the wall. Nothing—weeds, broken ground, a bush or two. She wrung her hands and became conscious of the object he had given her. It was a transparent disk, about like a plain flat flashlight lens. She turned it over twice, then impulsively looked through it.

She saw Loolyo crouched in a . . . machine.

She saw the machine leave, and when it was gone, her glass disc ceased to exist also, so that she had nothing of his any more. For a while she thought she could not survive that. And in its time came the thing known to everyone who has had grief enough:

that no matter what you've lost, the lungs and the heart go on, and all around, birds fly, cars pass, people make a buck and lose their souls and get hernia and happy and their hair cut just like before.

When she came through the other side of this, it was quite a bit later. She was weak and numb but she could drive again, so she did, very carefully, and soon she was able to think again, so she did, just as carefully, and by the time she got home her rehearsed "Hel-lo!" was perfect and easy.

Maybe she forgot to rehearse her face. Fritz Rhys, shirtless, huge and understanding, came up out of the big chair like a cresting wave of muscles and kindness. He took her hand and laughed quietly and brought her to the couch. She cowered back into the corner cushions and just sat, waiting for him to wash over her any way he wanted. He sat on the edge of the couch close to her, leaning forward to wall her away from the world, his heavy forearm and fist on the end-table next to

the couch; singlehandedly he surrounded her. "Alma . . ." he whispered, and waited, waited, until at last she met his eyes.

"I'm not angry," he told her. "Believe me, honey, I'm glad you can . . . love someone that much. It only means you're alive and . . . compassionate and—Alma." He laughed the quiet laugh again. "Of course I'll admit I'm glad he turned out to be a—one of the girls. I don't know what I'd do if you ever felt that way about a real man."

Her eyes had been fixed on his all the while, and now she moved them, let them drop to the heavy naked forearm which lay across the polished wood of the end table. She watched it with increasing fascination as he talked. "So let's chalk up one for the statistical mind, namely me, versus feminine intuition which sort of let you down. What are you staring at?"

She was staring at the forearm. Almost in spite of herself she reached for it. She didn't answer.

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He said, "It could have been worse. Imagine living with him. Imagine getting right to the point, drunk on poetry and shiny hair, and just when you were . . . ah, why go on. It would be impossible."

"It was impossible," she said in a low voice. She put her hand on his forearm, looked up and saw him watching her, and snatched the hand away self-consciously. She couldn't seem to keep her eyes off his arm. She began to smile, looking at it. He was a big man, and his forearm was about seventeen inches long and perhaps five and a half inches thick. "Quite impossible," she murmured, "and that's about the size of it." *Damn near exactly the size of it*, she thought wildly.

"Good girl!" he said heartily. "And now I'll give you forty-eight hours mooning time and then we'll be—"

His voice trailed off weakly as he watched the wildness transfer itself from somewhere inside her to her face and turn to laughter, floods, arrows, flights, peals, bullets of laughter.

"Alma!"

Her laughter ceased instantly but left her lips curled and her eyes glittering. "You better go back to killing the green monkeys," she said in a flat hard voice. "You've given them a beachhead."

"What?"

"There's something awfully small about you, Fritz Rhys," she said, and again the laughter, more and more of it, and he couldn't croon it down, he couldn't shout it down, and he couldn't stand it. He got dressed and packed his bag and said from the door, into the blare and blaze of her laughter, "I don't understand you. I don't understand you at all," and he went back to Washington.



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